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# Madan no Ou to Vanadis

## Volume 01 Preview

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Please read [Template:PREVIEW](#) for further information.

These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 1



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## Prologue

The tip of a longsword was thrusted before him.

Holding the sword was a beautiful girl. Her impressive argent hair reached her waist; she looked calmly at the boy from her horse.

“Drop your bow.”

The boy obediently placed his bow on the ground.

He had no thoughts of resistance. He had already used up his supply of arrows.

Countless corpses lay in the surroundings. Broken swords and spears stuck up, as if they were grave posts. The smell of blood blew thickly in the wind.

“My name is Eleanora Viltaria. Yours?”

The girl's refreshing voice blew away the smell of blood.

Her eyes were dignified, with red irises both mysterious and bright.

The boy responded, though puzzled.

“... Tigrevurmud Vorn.”

Upon hearing this, she sheathed her blade.

She smiled at the boy.

“You belong to me now.”

## Encounter with the Vanadis

“Tigre-sama”

His body was shaken by a girl with a familiar voice.

Since it was bright outside the window, he knew morning had come.

Still, he was sleepy.

“A little longer... Just a little more.”

“How long is a little more?”

“I don't have any hunting planned for the day, so until noon...”

“Please don't be lazy and wake up!”

She scolded him.

After the blankets were stripped off, Tigre's shoulder was violently grabbed.

Upon opening his eyes, he saw a girl whose face was quenched red in anger. She had a childish face and

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chestnut-brown hair in a pigtail style which was hardly threatening, even when angry.

“Ah... Morning, Teita.”



In a drawn out voice which betrayed his drowsiness, Tigre called the name of the young maid. Teita released him after realizing he was awake.

“The soldiers have already finished preparing, they are waiting for you, Tigre-sama!”

Tigre blankly repeated her words several times in his head.

His face grew pale at once.

“... Shit!”

He stumbled out of bed as Teita folded his evening clothes. She placed a small pail of water by his feet.

“Thank you for preparing things as usual.”

“I thought this might happen. I will prepare your meal. Once you have washed your face, please come.”

Showing no sign of anger, Teita smiled brilliantly and bowed while holding her skirt before leaving the room with short steps.

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Tigre felt refreshed after washing his face and was at last completely awake. Donning his clothes and dashing out of the room, he fastened his buttons while running down the hall.

"I don't have any time... I wonder if I can really leave it , though."

Tigre headed straight for a room at the end of the small corridor.

It was a small room, barely able to seat three adults. There stood a splendid decoration upon which a bow was propped.

The strings were soaked and pulled over the summer, so it was available for use at any time if he were so inclined. The only feature of the bow was its black color.

It drew a loose, curved grip, and the bowstring, as well , was black.

It was as if the bow itself had been cut from darkness.

*--- When I look at this, I get a strange feeling.*

The bow, a heirloom of Tigre's family, had an odd atmosphere different from others. It is said the Vorn family ancestors once used it in their hunts.

Tigre's father left a will regarding the bow.

“Only when you truly need this bow should you use it. Do not use it otherwise.”

Due to the will of his father, the mild disgust he felt for the bow, and his respect for his ancestors, Tigre avoided touching it as much as possible.

Correcting his posture and breathing, Tigre grasped his fist before his chest and gave thanks to the bow of his ancestors, passed down the generations.

When he finished, he stepped quickly and quietly into the passage. Tigre hastily rushed to the dining room.

Tigrevurmud, 16 years old, was born into the family of an Earl in the Brune Kingdom. He took over the house when his father fell ill and died two years ago.

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His title was something of an exaggeration, as his ancestors were the ones to attain the status of Earl. He felt he was simply a person called Tigre.

When Tigre entered the dining room, a sweet, fragrant aroma reached his nose.

On the rustic table was ham, rye bread, an omelet, milk, and mushroom soup from which steam drifted.

Teita awaited him at the table.

“I am fine with just the soup.”

“That is no good.”

When it came to meal time, Teita always remained stubborn.

“What would you do if your stomach sounded before everyone. It would be disgraceful.”

With her hands at her waist, her gaze looked sternly at Tigre. She looked more frightening than she did earlier when he awoke.

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Tigre surrendered the battle he could not win and began eating with her.

After eating his bread and drinking his milk, he quickly ate his omelet and soup.

“Thank you for the meal.”

He stood up as he spoke those words. Teita, with a napkin and brush in hand, approached him.

“You have some food remaining. Please make sure to wipe it off properly.”

She spoke with a slightly angry tone, wiping Tigre's mouth with the napkin.

“Your hair is a mess as well.”

After that, Teita, her hand holding the brush stretched forward, carefully combed his red hair.

“Look, your collar is bent as well.”

Placing the brush and napkin on the table, her hand extended to Tigre's collar. Though she had finished, Tigre remained.

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“--- Tigre-sama.”

“Yes?”

Teita's voice suddenly became weak. Tigre gently replied to her. He spoke to her as a younger sister, as she was one year younger.

“Why, why must you go to war, Tigre-sama?”

Tigre had a troubled face as he tampered with his red hair. It was obvious what Teita was saying.

“It is at His Majesty's beckoning. As the head of the household, as Earl Vorn, it is natural I serve the Kingdom of Brune.”

“B-but.”

She looked up at Tigre with a tearful face, continuing to argue.

“You were barely able to gather one hundred soldiers..  
.”

Though he was an aristocrat, he was a minor one.

The Vorn family was not poor; rather, they were simple. Calling them modest was suitable.

The territory of Alsace was in the countryside amongst mountains and forests, far from the center of the country, and his income was minimal.

He was far removed from the regality associated with a noble. Tigre's life was far from grand.

Though his residence was not too large, the one handling all chores was Teita alone.

"I have heard the enemy is from the Zhcted Kingdom. In that case, you should be here, Tigre-sama. There is only a single mountain between Alsace and the Zhcted Kingdom, after all."

"That may be true, but this is the countryside. Zhcted has no reason to attack such a place."

Tigre was grateful that his land would not become a battlefield.

"That... So you will go, even if they ridicule you for your bow."

“That is because it's impossible to perform distinguished military services.”

“It doesn't matter if you do such things!”

Teita shouted and clung to him, her face buried in Tigre's chest.

“Just... don't overwork yourself, and don't get injured. Please return safely.”

Tigre gently hugged the maid's delicate body as she worried about him.

“Don't worry. I returned safe and sound from my first battle two years ago.”

“At that time, Urz-sama was...”

Teita swallowed her words. Urz was Tigre's father who died two years ago.

Tigre tapped Teita's head to reassure her.

“In this battle, my forces have been placed in the rear. It will be safe. Even if something happens, I'll somehow manage.”

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As he used his finger to wipe the tears about to spill, Teita nodded.

“Is, is it really fine, Tigre-sama? You are always oversleeping. Make sure not to do so on the battlefield.”

“I don't like how you're saying I always oversleep.”

“It is simply a fact. Tigre-sama is only able to wake up properly on a hunting day.”

Tigre's counterargument was stopped by a disappointed objection.

Still, he understood that Teita was encouraging him as much as she could. Tigre held her closely once again.

Teita entrusted her body to Tigre.

Her warmth could be felt through his clothes, a sweet scent drifted faintly from her chestnut-brown hair.

Any longer than this would only be more painful.

Tigre released her, reluctant to let go.

“I shall take my leave, Teita.”

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Wiping her tears with her sleeve, Teita smiled.

“Please leave the house to me. Be careful, Tigre-sama.”

Tigre carried a bow and quiver over his shoulder and left the house. The soldiers were already waiting in formation. A small old man wearing leather armor bowed to Tigre.

“Young Lord, all members are prepared. Our equipment is also ready.”

“You've worked hard, Batran.”

The elderly man was a servant of Tigre whose experience in war far surpassed his own. He was the only one other than Tigre permitted on horseback.

All the others were foot soldiers equipped with leather armor and a spear or a sword.

“You've all gathered.”

As Tigre spoke words of appreciation, the veteran soldiers cheerfully made a joke.

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“Lord, there is no need to worry. Though it's been three years since we last saw battle, we have trained our body without a mistake every day laboring in the fields.”

“Whether we disobey the King's orders or follow them, we'll have plenty of food, it seems.”

“That's a welcome remark. By the way, is your wife not coming? The enemy only has one or two thousand men. I'm sure she could drive them away with her shouting.”

Laughter erupted between the soldiers.

“You should stop saying that before the Young Lord. His wife is indifferent to both enemy and ally.”

Looking back at Batran, Tigre ended the conversation with a shrug of his shoulders.

--- *Morale shouldn't be an issue.*

As the laughter subsided, the men saluted Tigre. Batran drew his bow with his right hand and issued a cry

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“Our destination is Dinant Plains. We shall join Lord Massas' army halfway.”

The infantry looked at their battle flags.

There were two kinds of flags. The flag of house Vorn held a white crescent-moon and meteor on blue fabric.

The other was the Red Horse Flag – the symbol of Brune Kingdom which had a red horse with a black mane. “We're off!”

It was the first time Brune Kingdom and Zhcted Kingdom crossed blades in twenty years.

The cause of conflict was due to heavy rain, which caused the river bordering the two kingdoms to flood.

Many residents were injured “Because those people did not properly manage the river.” It caused quite a quarrel.

Each country received a petition from the other to properly manage the waters. As such, the two armies were forced to go to war.

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Still, that was not enough to pull Tigre to war.

“It appears the enemy has about five thousand troops going against our twenty-five thousand. The troops seem pretty excited here.”

With a sarcastic tone, an elderly Knight named Massas Rodant sat next to Tigre. He was a friend of Tigre's father and often acted as a benefactor.

“Is it true this is His Highness, the Prince's first battle?  
”

While moving forward side-by-side on horseback, Tigre asked Massas.

“I'm quite certain. It's well known His Majesty dotes on his son.”

Massas, his stocky body wrapped in iron armor, stroked his gray beard with a grumpy face.

“Many parents are reluctant to allow their children to come out for the upcoming war, and it is certainly different when it's for a serious affair that may risk the

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fate of the nation. In that sense, the King is sending out Prince Regnas to his first battle for a decoration... I suppose it will be a good experience for him."

He probably wanted his beloved son to be decorated in his first battle.

The King sent the Knights under his direct control as well as the troops belonging to the nobles ruling the territories near Dinant Plains to battle.

This included small aristocrats such as Tigre and Massas.

Once all the armies joined together, they numbered more than twenty-five thousand.

Massas led just under three hundred soldiers. Amongst them, only fifty were cavalry.

Though it may be inappropriate to say, that amount would be completely buried within the twenty-five thousand. Whether Tigre was stationed in the rear or not, nothing would change.

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“It's normal to try and outnumber the enemy in war. Prince Regnas will one day become King. Doing things in such a way is not wrong of His Majesty.”

Out of comfort, the old Knight tapped Tigre's shoulder

Though it may not have been his real intention, he had said those words to convince himself as well.

“That's right. We small-time nobles should just stay quiet in the rear. Stepping into battle, earning a distinguished military service, there are plenty of people who want to get ahead... That's right, Tigre, have you heard of the Vanadis?”

As he heard the term, Tigre recalled a rumor and tilted his head.

“The seven Vanadis of Zhcted?”

“That's right. The enemy commander seems to be one of the Vanadis. She is a youth, 16 years old who has never been defeated. She is known for her excellent swordsmanship and is also called the

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[Wind Princess of the Silver Flash] and  
[Danseuse of the Sword] since she spearheads the battle.”

In Zhcted Kingdom, there existed seven Vanadis.

The land was divided into seven provinces, each governed by one of the women known as a Vanadis – it was difficult to think they were the same age as him.

Tigre strangely admired the enemy Commander he had not yet seen. She was the same age and had many victories to her name and was currently leading a force of five thousand.

In Brune Kingdom, where Tigre was born, women were not allowed to be Knights, so the nobility had no incentive to send their daughters out.

Even in this war, there was not a single female Knight present.

That, too, was a source of interest.

“What is the name of this Vanadis?”

“If I remember, it is Eleanora Viltaria, and I heard she's quite the extraordinary beauty, like a jewel that will never fade.”

“Is she really that beautiful?”

“It's fine to admire beauty, but keep it in moderation. Teita will be jealous.”

Massas laughed, his gray beard shaking, as Tigre became angry.

“Why are you bringing up Teita? She's like a little sister---”

“Since she was little, she's been the little sister reliably taking care of an untidy elder brother.”

Hearing no retort, he ruffled Tigre's dull red hair and returned to the story at hand.

“If the Vanadis is as great a leader as rumors say, this battle will be difficult.”

“Still, the difference in number is quite large. No matter how much an expert she is, it will be difficult for her to win.”

No matter the bravery or ability of the Vanadis, a five-fold difference in troops should be impossible to overturn. Though Tigre wanted to agree, he could not say it so easily.

*What is it, this unpleasant feeling?* He had a burning sensation around the nape of his neck.

Tigre had been attacked by this feeling before.

At that time, in the depths of the forest, when he was hunting a pack of wolves, he encountered a Dragon by the mountains.

He also felt it in the morning when Teita came as normal and his groin remained unhidden.

Either way, nothing ever went well at those times.

“Don’t look so glum.”

It seems to have appeared on his face. Massas looked at him dubiously.

“Were you thinking of something? You’re looking a bit absent-minded.”

“Absent-minded... There are other ways to put it. You could say I’m calm and collected.”

Tigre responded in a dissatisfied manner. Massas narrowed his eyes and laughed.

“You’re pretty difficult. I remember two years ago when you succeeded Urz’ position.”

“Hm, did I say something?”

“Before the representatives of the towns and villages, when asked about the future of Alsace, you said, ‘Well, I’ll manage.’ That’s what I meant by absent-minded.”

Tigre, unable to respond, shrugged his shoulders.

Massas continued to complain.

“While Urz was alive, you had a calm, gentle temperament; you were optimistic. You slept a lot, so I suppose I should praise you for being so healthy. Really, your parents were quite lenient.”

“Still, weren't they proud of me?”

Waiting for a break in Massas' words, Tigre finally retorted.

Actually, he did not particularly have any problem with Alsace as a whole.

His savings had gradually increased. Even if he was rather absent-minded around the village representatives, he had done reasonably well.

“Except for hunting days, can you get up on your own? That is, without Teita's help.”

“No, that's...”

“From what Teita has told me... Sometimes you just run away with your bow and arrow and spend two, three days to hunt in the nearby forests and mountains.”

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Tigre's shoulders shrunk in silence. He could not deny that one.

“To think a guy like you is the Lord. Well, I guess I can see it in your face.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Massas saw a group of soldiers.

Though their will to fight was not lacking, they were placed in the rear. Still, no one made any complaints.

“Tigre, it's your job to bring your soldiers back alive. It's your job to think how they fight. I'm not sure what you're concerned about, but make sure you perform your duty.”

“Thank you very much.”

Seeing Massas' concern, Tigre smiled and thanked him

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As he said, it would be pointless to think of extraneous things.

Though they were only there to make the Prince look better, they still had gathered.

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Nothing was expected from Tigre or Massas as war potentials. Even so, he took the advice to heart.

A few days later, Tigre arrived at Dinant Plains.

Twenty thousand soldiers stood at the foot of a hill; the remaining five thousand stood in the rear, atop the hill, surrounding Prince Regnas. Both Tigre and Massas were located there.

It was likely the battle would end before they fought.

Before dawn, one thousand cavalry quietly marched.

Their swords and spears were covered with mud to dull their shine; the horses were covered in plates to hide them; their horseshoes were carefully wrapped in cotton cloth.

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They reached a small hill near the enemy without being noticed.

It was only a gentle slope before they reached where the Brune rearguard was encamped for the night. The bonfires could be seen dancing in the night.

“--- Rest and make preparations.”

The girl with argent hair standing before the cavalry laughed lightly. After her words, the soldiers removed the plates from the horses and the cloth from the horseshoes.

Eventually, the scout, who went ahead alone, returned

The enemy had fallen asleep without having noticed them. The girl looked back at her men and unsheathed her longsword. A faint wind blew along the length of the blade.

“The enemy is five thousand strong and outnumber us five to one. Though the rearguard, this is where their Commander's headquarters lay. He is likely a battle-hardened elite.”

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Still, the girl's red eyes were filled with a fighting spirit

“I will go. I will win. Will you follow me?”

In silence, the soldiers thrust their swords and spears to the sky.

The girl turned toward the enemy encampment and swung her sword forward.

“Charge!”

The banner fluttered in the wind. The <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Black Dragon Flag, the flag of the Kingdom of Zhcted, had a Black Dragon breathing a black fire displayed.

The wind stirred. The cavalry readied their swords and spears. The archers nocked their bow. They all followed the girl up the hill.

The guards finally noticed the rumbling of the earth as the horses invaded the base.

However, it was too late.

“The enemy---”

The girl, in a single strike, took the soldier's neck, not letting his scream escape.

Against the sky which gradually grew light, one thousand cavalrymen led by the girl invaded the enemy camp. The Brune Army fell to chaos, discarding their weapons and fleeing in a frenzy.

Though some soldiers resisted valiantly, the difference between their strength was far too great.

The strength of the girl wielding a sword and leading the Zhcted Army was overwhelming.

She cut through those deserting the battle in a single blow or kicked them mercilessly with her steed. Not a drop of blood touched her.

Every time the longsword became encased in wind, a corpse fell to the ground; the body count increased. The girl with fluttering silver-white hair cleaved the enemy as she advanced on to the enemy camp, the cavalry following close behind.

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By this point, victory and defeat had been nearly decided.

His ears were ringing.

There were many screams; it was a day of judgment. The sound of swords and the roar of horseshoes echoed in his ear.

“... Uwa.”

He awoke.

He inhaled the blue sky of dawn spread before him.

Pushing and moving the weights against his body, Tigre rose.

The ringing in his ears disappeared only to be replaced with moans drowned out by the sound of wind. The torn

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banner fluttered slightly; the sound of grass being trod upon could be heard.

As the dust settled, the scent of blood crept into his nose.

“I must have been unconscious...”

He stretched his neck out above the pile of corpses and looked about.

The grass was dyed with blood, several thousand bodies lay upon the earth.

Covering his mouth with his hand to ease the nausea, he noticed his hand was wet and dyed red.

--- *Blood...?*

Patting his face, he noticed no signs of injury.

“Someone else's blood.”

Tigre was apparently alive because he was buried beneath the corpses. It is likely none of the enemies even set eyes on him.

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“Batran! Lord Massas!”

He called out the name of his faithful subordinate and the elder he trusted, but received no reply.

He tried calling the soldiers under his command and still was not met with a reaction.

“It would be good if they escaped.”

All he could see were corpses and broken swords and spears; the banner was torn and discarded.

Though he was unsure, shrouded in the early-morning mist, there were no signs of motion from either friend or foe.

He did not feel anger toward the enemy. Fatigue weighed upon his body, and a sigh escaped his mouth.

“What a terrible battle...”

Almost simultaneous with the rising dawn, the Brune Army took a surprise attack. Confused by the rear attack, the large, twenty-five thousand strong army who was anticipating a frontal assault collapsed.

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*--- The day before yesterday, before darkness fell, our army confirmed the enemy was before us. In other words, the Zhcted army divided its forces in two and attacked the rearguard first. Still, we had been attacked from the front as well.*

Tigre felt the back of his neck go cold.

It was a simple plan, even a child could think of it.

*--- How frightening, the spirit to calmly execute such a plan against an enemy with five times the strength.*

Despite having fewer soldiers, they divided their army even further. If their troops had not moved exceptionally well, they would certainly have faced an unsatisfying defeat.

*--- However, it succeeded splendidly.*

The Brune Army collapsed completely.

Swept away by the wave of fleeing allies , Tigre could not possibly take charge and fell from his horse, knocked unconscious in the process.

Tigre's unit was overwhelmed by his allies.

“Even so...”

Tigre remembered. Though only for a moment, he saw the silver-white haired girl wielding the longsword as she led the enemy and killed one Brune soldier after another.

“So that was the Vanadis...”

The Vanadis always leads the troops. He recalled Massas' words.

It was improper to simply call her beautiful. Tigre felt his red hair stir as he was deep in thought.

Fortunately, his bow dropped nearby.

Picking it up, he checked the tension on the bowstring as he was attacked by anxiety.

“... Shouldn't be a problem.”

He stroked his chest in relief, seeing his bowstring still taut.

He was still not ready.

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Few of the arrows in his quiver remained as well.

Looking up to the sky, Tigre confirmed the position of the sun.

“West is that way.”

The Zhcted Army arrived at the battlefield from the east. Brune was to the west.

Enduring the pain running through his body, Tigre slowly walked west. His feet stopped as he recognized something in his peripheral vision.

A Knight was running at him, brandishing a sword.

Tigre took out an arrow and drew his bow.

The horse trampled and kicked corpses aside as the Knight forced his way towards Tigre. When the distance shrank to thirty alsin (approximately thirty meters), the Knight yelled.

“Survivor of Brune, I will have your neck!”

Tigre silently nocked his arrow and looked on as he casually shot.

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The air was blurred.

He heard the dull sound of the arrow accurately piercing the man's throat.

He was surprisingly quick and calm.

The Knight's body could not react and leaned over, falling to the ground.

The horse, now without a mount, gave a shrill sound, stopped, turned, and ran away.

“I give up... I guess things aren't going my way..”

He let out a sigh. Wondering if there was a horse he could easily get off the battlefield, Tigre resumed his walk and stopped after fewer than ten steps.

“An enemy?”

Three hundred alsin (approximately three hundred meters) away, he saw a group of soldiers. If he was found, they would surely catch him.

“... Seven people.”

Tigre was born with a good eye, further tempered by hunting. A distance of three hundred alsin was enough for him to distinguish a person's face.

He verified the contents of his quiver. There were four arrows remaining.

Though he was confident in his archery, he could not come out with a tactical victory if it was two-to-one. If it was no different from the man before, he could only be merciless.

*--- It is possible they are allies.*

While hoping it might be so, Tigre observed the Knights. He could not believe the face he saw.

“The Vanadis...”

In the surprise attack the evening before, she was the girl who stood before the army.

Tigre forgot to breathe while admiring her.

She was a young girl his age, her hair of silver-white, which reached her waist, shimmered in the morning sunlight. Her bright red irises burned with dignity.

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An delicate arm matching her age extended from her body. In her hand, she gripped a longsword which strangely suited her.

*--- Lord Massas said she held a unique beauty.*

Was it even necessary to say he was right? It certainly was unique, or perhaps rare. The more he looked, the more he agreed.

Tigre regained his senses by shaking his head, pushing away all idle thoughts. He stared at the Vanadis with a calm gaze.

The other Knights must have been her guard. Their horses advanced as if defending her.

*--- If I take out the Vanadis...*

The army had suffered a disastrous defeat. Surely there was a large-scale pursuit, as many Brune soldiers had run away.

*“... If she falls, it will be impossible for the enemy to continue their pursuit.”*

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The soldiers following Massas and Batran and those from Alsace would be more likely to survive.

An urge to fight welled within him. Power entered the hand grasping his bow.

“I'll give it a try.”

Tigre pulled out an arrow and nocked it.

The bowstring bent. He unconsciously chanted the name of God.

“Oh Eris, Goddess of Storms...”

The creaking of the bowstring tickled his eardrum.

Currently, on the continent, the maximum range of a bow is approximately two-hundred-fifty alsin (approximately two-hundred-fifty meters).

This was simply a measure of the distance, not where it could fly.

Aiming at that distance would decrease the damage an enemy would incur, so it was necessary to estimate to lower distances.

The Vanadis was still three hundred alsin (approximately three hundred meters) away.

Still, Tigre shot the arrow.

The arrow cut through the wind and bore deeply into the head of the horse of a nearby Knight.

The Knight was thrown to the ground as the horse toppled over. Tigre shot his second arrow, piercing the center of the forehead of another horse.

“Good.”

The path was now clear with two guards grounded.

There was now a gap in which his arrows could reach the Vanadis with argent hair and red irises.

“Now for the real thing.”

Tigre reached for his quiver, his breath hot and heavy.

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In the recesses of the mountain where the sun did not  
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shine, he had faced an Earth Dragon at no more than forty chet (approximately four meters). Even then, he was not so tense.

*--- Even if the other Knights tried to defend her, with the dead horses and the fallen soldiers obstructing their movements, it would take them time.*

It was a very short amount of time, though.

However, it was enough for Tigre.

*--- She will take action in a situation like this. Will she duck down, or will she jump off her horse immediately?*

It was impossible to move left or right, and backing away a few steps would hardly be a retreat. Fallen men and horses were before her, so it would be difficult to jump over them without a larger run-up.

Even if it was possible, she would not have time to hide from an arrow after landing.

Tigre stared at the Vanadis once again and was attacked by a ferocious chill.

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The Vanadis smiled.

She was clearly happy.

“Ku!”

Tigre clenched his teeth. He was nearly swallowed by her. He removed the remaining two arrows, placed one in his mouth, and nocked the other.

However, Tigre saw an unbelievable sight

The horse the Vanadis rode gently flew through the air

It jumped over her fallen subordinates.

It reached a height of nearly twenty chet (approximately two meters).

It felt like wings grew from its back to Tigre. It did not jump, it flew.

“What now...?”

Tigre's entire body trembled in fear. He wondered whether his eyes had deceived him.

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A horse could not possibly jump as high as twenty  
chet without a run-up while mounted.



However, the Vanadis landed as if nothing happened. The horse began running straight toward him. He had no time to be afraid.

He scolded himself. It must have been an illusion of some sort.

Tigre glared at her and fired his third arrow.

The arrow rode the wind, cutting through the sky toward her forehead – it was struck down by a flash of silver.

“... Seriously?”

Tigre could hardly believe his eyes. His mouth was open and cramped.

The arrow flew at a high speed from many hundreds of alsin, and she struck it down with a sword.

He thought only a hero from legends could do something like that. It is hardly something the average person could do.

He nocked his last arrow.

Only in his bow did he have absolute confidence. His opponent was running toward him alone, she was already less than three hundred alsin away.

--- *I can't afford to miss.*

He aimed and shot his final arrow however it was deflected in exactly the same manner as before.

Meanwhile, the Vanadis rushed forward on her horse without letting go for even a moment. She ran fiercely and would arrive within ten seconds.

“So this is it.”

His arrows were exhausted. He had no other arms. It would be impossible to run away from the horse on foot.

Clutching his bow, Tigre stood upright on both feet with great strength. His actions were by no means unsightly.

The Vanadis stopped her horse before Tigre.

The spray of blood and flying dust did not touch her silver-white hair.

Her white skin reminded him of the snow which perpetually lay on the mountains of his hometown.

She displayed clean contours, a well-shaped nose, and charming, moist lips reminiscent of the finest sculpture. Her bright red irises overflowed with energy; she gave an impression of not being made of flesh and blood.

She thrust the tip of her longsword toward Tigre.

“Drop your bow.”

After he reluctantly obeyed, the Vanadis nodded in satisfaction and spoke with a smile.

“You're skilled.”

Tigre did not immediately understand the words directed at him.

--- *She's praising me...? The man who took aim at her?*

His confusion surpassed his joy.

“My name is Eleanora Viltaria. Yours?”

“... Tigrevurmud Vorn.”

---

“An aristocrat? Your title?”

In both Brune and Zhcted, only those of nobility held family names. The people with a family name who did not belong to aristocracy were a small exception.

When he told her he was an Earl, her smile became increasingly joyful.

“Very well, Earl Vorn.”

The longsword was sheathed at her waist. Eleanora spoke brightly.

“You belong to me now.”

She spoke words which seemed to hold little thought. At last, her escort finally caught up.

Though they surrounded Tigre and pointed their swords and spears at him, when Eleanora waved her hand, they showed their surprise.

“Lim, take this guy with you. He's my captive. Don't treat him too roughly.”

---

The Knight named Lim, who had just caught up, nodded silently. Because her helmet covered her face, Tigre could not read her expression.

“Get on, quickly.”

Lim looked down at Tigre and spoke with a low voice from within the helmet. Tigre could feel anger in the voice and soon realized why.

Just a moment ago, she was one of the Knights who fell from her horse.

*--- Did she borrow a horse from another Knight? Is she above the other guards?*

“May I pick up my bow?”

Tigre pointed at the bow on the ground.

“It is important to me.”

He displayed his lack of hostility by showing her his empty quiver. Lim extended her hand to him from atop the horse.

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“Fine. However, I will keep it.”

When Tigre passed Lim the bow and mounted the horse, his hands moved to her waist.

Lim suddenly moved her neck, the back of her helmet strongly hitting Tigre's face.

“What are you doing?”

Tigre suppressed his protest by pressing against his swollen nose. Eleanora laughed with trembling shoulders.

“Lim, he's my captive. Be a bit easier.”

“... As you wish.”

Lim followed orders, despite the dissatisfaction clearly oozing from her voice.

“If you do anything strange, I will shake you off immediately and have the horse step on you.”

Tigre sighed. He was a bit frightened of the aggression in Lim's voice and felt unease for his future.

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Looking back at the Knights, Eleanora spoke triumphantly.

“Though it was a boring battle, I quite enjoyed things as we withdrew.”

The Battle of Dinant ended as a one-sided victory for the Zhcted Kingdom.

The casualties of the Zhcted Army numbered fewer than one-hundred while more than five thousand from Brune had perished. The injured more than doubled that.

It goes without saying, the losses suffered by Brune would be difficult to fill. More so because the heir to the throne, Prince Regnas, was killed in battle.

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## LeitMeritz

He was having a dream, though it wasn't quite a good one.

*On a small hill, our forces were gathered.*

*It was meal time. The soldiers put a pot that was as deep as a barrel on the mound, which had been turned into a stove. They were preparing a fish stew.*

*There was a slight ridge before Dinant Plains, which plateaued with no end in sight.*

*There were twenty thousand Brune soldiers sharing a meal with his own troops. Thousands of streams of heat floated upward ,and the soldiers seemed as though they were imprisoned in the steam.*

Tigre and Massas were talking while stirring the food in the pot when a few young men appeared in front of their eyes with the colliding sound of their armor.

“So you came as well, Vorn.”

The man who said that with an openly mocking tone was Zaien Thenardier.

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The Thenardier house held the title of Duke. It was a long distinguished family incomparable to the Vorn household. It had many aristocrats who held enormous power, and the territory it owned was wide. It is said the number of soldiers mobilized by the household can reach ten thousand.

Even in this war, which was organized in haste, they commanded a force four thousand strong.

Zaien was the Thenardier family's eldest son and heir to the household. He was currently 17 years old.

Though he wore decorated armor and bore a splendid sword at his waist in an imposing manner, worthy of his lineage, he always had an expression as if looking down on others.

At his back was an entourage of young men flattering him.

Just like Zaien, they were aristocrats born into the families with the ranks of marquis or duke, wearing glittering armor with their respective household crests. They looked at Tigre with a grimace and did not seem to harbor good intentions.

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Tigre could not ignore them, and felt obliged to show the minimal courtesy.

“... I am here to serve as His Majesty's loyal subject, so I came here as quickly as possible.”

“Though it's quite admirable to say that, I'm not sure how helpful you'll be.”

After Zaien ridiculed Tigre, the laughter of the other nobles overlapped his own. Maybe because their respective ages were similar, Zaien frequently made fun of Tigre in such a manner.

“I told you before, your family has merely hunted for four or five generations. I can hardly recognize you as a noble.”

He spat out those words arrogantly and immediately tried to stomp Tigre's bow, which was laying on the ground.

Tigre moved in a reflexive manner, picking up his bow as quickly as a wild beast.

“Uwa!”

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Zaien stumbled, lost his balance and fell hard on the ground, taking with him one of his followers.

“How dare you do that to master Zaien!”

To the enraged followers who roared at him, Tigre yelled back:

“I was protecting my bow!”

“A bow? If it's a bow, so what, you coward!”

“That's right. There's nothing bad in breaking this crap. You should be on the front lines with a sword!”

“I'm sure the God of War, Trigraf, would never give his blessings to someone like you!”

The other followers expressed their approval one after another. Tigre gritted his teeth in anger.

In the Brune Kingdom, their complaints were acceptable.

“The bow is the arm of a coward who does not have the courage to expose his body before a naked blade.”

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Such train of thoughts were deeply rooted in the Brune Army, which made little use of the bow.

It's not only that the archers' achievements were disregarded, but also archers in general.

"The archers are all drafted hunters, farmers who do not own land, people who have committed a serious crime as warriors--or some people to fill the ranks who aren't great with the sword or the spear."

Due to such a norm, those who used bows, even as soldiers, were regarded as criminals and useless failures that are looked down on.

Though Tigre's ancestor performed distinguished military services for which he was presented with territory for hunting and was promoted to the title of Earl, Massas told him: "If he wasn't a hunter, he'd probably be promoted to an even higher rank."

"Calm down, you guys."

Zaien stood up difficultly with some help, and put a stop to his followers' actions.

Though reluctant, they still stopped blaming Tigre.

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Zaien put on an act while getting rid of the dust on his armor, crossed his arms and laughed at Tigre in scorn.

“The reason you stick to a bow is that you can't handle a sword or spear, right? You probably think that if you headed to the battlefield with a bow, it could be barely enough to pretend to be a soldier, right?”

Tigre remained silent. It was true he was poor with the sword and spear.

If he objected here, Zaien would ask him to take up a sword or spear and show his skills and laugh at him. This had happened once before.

Zaien's taunt didn't stop here.

“To begin with, you are an Earl of the Kingdom of Brune. Yet, you can't use a sword or a spear and plan to head to the battlefield without wearing armor. Aren't you ashamed? Guys, look at his shabby appearance. He has a leather plate, leather gauntlets and even leather leggings. All his equipment is made of leather. At most, his mantle is decent, but if that's the only presentable part, then I really feel sad about the financial situation of his territory.”

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“--- Lord Zaien.”

Massas, who had remained silent until then, spoke sullenly.

“Your words have been insightful. However, since you said so much at once, surely you have become thirsty...”

He continued while pointing in a certain direction.

“There's some rayion wine being distributed over there. Why not try drinking some, to relieve your thirst?”

Using a polite and humble tone, Massas's attitude put pressure on the other side.

The dignity of this old Knight, who had just turned 55, was intimidating to Zaien.

Zaien grunted and stepped back involuntarily as he became aware that he forgot his manners. He then snorted and turned around.

“Hey, let's go.”

Tigre watched Zaien and the others walk away, and thanked Massas after checking his bow's condition.

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“Thank you. You saved me.”

“It's nothing. I should be the one to apologize. It would be better if I had intervened earlier, but I couldn't find an opportunity to barge in.”

From Zaien's perspective, Massas was a weak aristocrat no different from Tigre. If the former didn't get the timing right, he would simply snort with laughter.

While returning to stir the pan, Massas looked about the area casually.

Whether soldier or aristocrat, all was concentrated on their pots, or was taking care of their arms while entertaining themselves with chatter. Not a single person looked this way, and that indifference reached an unnatural state.

They were all afraid of Zaien, so they avoided relations with Tigre.

“I now understand that handling the sword and spear is not a proof of courage.”

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Massas spoke in irony. Tigre wanted to say something to him, but shut his mouth at the end. Because not far away, the barely audible voices of nobles gathered together reached his ears.

“By the way, did you hear about what Duke Ganelon did?”

“Are you talking about him increasing taxes, using war preparations as excuse?”

“That's right. If there is a young girl in a house that's not paying taxes, she will be taken away. If there isn't one, then the house is set on fire.”

“It's really enviable. I'd like to have the authority to place a temporary tax too.”

The aristocrat didn't look resentful, but was simply grumbling in dissatisfaction.

Duke Ganelon was one of the most influential nobles of Brune Kingdom, on par with Thenardier.

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There were also many powerful aristocrats amongst his relatives. His power was something that even the King could not ignore.

Regarding territory, Brune nobles were recognized and allowed to govern a territory, but for certain privileges, such as setting taxes, the permission of the King was necessary.

Duke Ganelon not only went against this rule and imposed tax without consulting the King, but was also did these inhuman things in his territory. Yet, the king still tolerated that.

“For a story like that, Duke Thenardier is not inferior regarding doing that kind of things. He ordered his people to stop drinking as long as the war is going on. They had to hand over all alcohol as oath to the Gods.”

“I see. But it's not hard to hide or to make alcohol. What happens to those who are found guilty of violating the ban?”

“The part about kidnapping the family's daughters is similar to Ganelon's method. But as a warning, I heard that swords were given to husband and wife or the father

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and son ,and they were made to kill each other.It seems that they even bet on who would win.”

Tigre clenched his fist after hearing the conversation.

Massas placed a wrinkled hand on Tigre's knee as he was about to stand up.

“Calm down.”

“What, how can I possibly remain calm!?”

“Though it may be harsh of me to say this, nothing would change even if you said something.”

He was right. Tigre sat back down, but his rage was still boiling inside him.

He desperately gritted his teeth and held his silence, in order to restrain himself from acting on impulse.

He was angry because Ganelon and Thenardier did not regard the people within their dominion as humans. They did not hesitate in their cruelty. He was angry at the men who spoke lightly of such cruel matters and

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those who have an overlook those things without any scruple. Finally, he was angry at his powerlessness, as he knew he could do nothing.

“The story just now, is it true?”

“Though it is a rumor... there have been many others similar to this one. Still, the people in question have not denied it. You rarely come to the capital, so no wonder you don't know about this.”

Maybe this really couldn't be helped.

Tigre hardly left his territory, the land of Alsace.

He had no desire to rise in the world and gain fame or glory, nor did he have any ambition. That's why he was not interested in his status as an aristocrat.

Plus, in his mind, he has no intention of dealing with Zaien, who was one of the sons of the nobles.

“His Majesty still tolerates such behavior...?”

Fearfully, he asked.

He did not want to believe it.

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“Certainly, His Majesty has said nothing to them at the present.”

Massas' stocky body trembled as he shook his head grumpily.

“I believe His Majesty has his own matters to settle... One day, if His Majesty can't control them anymore, at least Prince Regnas should...”

Massas' eyes clung to the slender hope. Suddenly, he looked up and stared at Tigre. The latter, distracted, saw his finger come towards him, aim at his mouth and poke him there.

“Fue...?”

It was too abrupt. No words could come out from Tigre's mouth.

Furthermore, the hand blocking Tigre's mouth was kind of cold, and had an indescribable iron taste.

When he awoke, a dim ceiling was in Tigre's view.

“--- So you finally woke up.”

Tigre heard a voice which lacked intonation. Immediately after that, he felt something withdrawn from his mouth.

What left his mouth was a sword.

The owner of this sword was a woman with golden hair whom he had never seen before.

“... Where should I start.”

“By the way, this is my first time waking a person in such a way.”

She returned with a gaze and frosty words. Tigre was at a loss and tried greeting her for the time being.

“... Good morning.”

“It is one koku (two hours) through the day.”

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Tigre set up and looked at the woman while scratching his head.

She wore a skirt and short-sleeved shirt. She had long gloves which reached to her elbows and boots up to her knees. At her waist was her sheathed sword.

She was possibly taller than Tigre, and seemed to be two or three years older.

She was unmistakably a beautiful woman, but her scarce expressions gave her face a hard look, leaving her with an unsociable impression.

There were three particularly eye-catching features.

Tied on the left side of her head was long, golden hair.

Her azure eyes were as cold as marble.

And though she was tall and well balanced, she had ample bosoms which did not match her slender build.

Tigre inadvertently stared at the two swellings which bulged from beneath her clothes. The woman flashed her sword and threw an unkind remark.

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“--- If you don't wake up properly, I will skewer you.”

“... I'm sorry.”

Blushing, Tigre apologized properly.

He looked about the room. It was small, containing only the bed he slept on.

Sunlight shined through the window, brightly lighting the room. The stone floor was bare, and the only door led to the hallway. His bow leaned against the wall.

“Really, even with the soldiers shouting for your death, even though you are a prisoner... How can you sleep so well.”

“It's one of my special skills.”

“I suggest you hold back a little. You lack tension.”

Anger was mixed into her cold voice. Tigre looked at her in embarrassment.

“Am I really that bad?”

“To the extent that I recall my murderous intent.”

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The woman turned about as she threw an answer to Tigre, pushing the door open in the meanwhile.

“Eleanora-sama has called for you. Please follow me.”

Tigre put on his leather shoes and quickly followed after her.

“It's nice to meet you. I am ---”

“This is not our first meeting, Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn.”

She answered without turning around, her voice clearly rejecting him.

“My name is Limlisha. It is not necessary to remember it.”

LeitMeritz was a principality located in the Kingdom of Zhcted, under Eleanora's rule.

Eleanora's troops arrived at the capital yesterday. It had been ten days since they departed from Dinant.

After giving a word of thanks to the soldiers, Eleanora left the men to her adjutant, Limlisha, and returned to the King's capital with several men.

It was necessary to report her victory to the King.

During the return to the public capital, Tigre asked the guards a few times, and each time the response was the same.

“We have no need to respond to a prisoner of our Vanadis-sama.”

Even if he asked to meet Eleanora, it would not be possible for them to accept. Regardless, there was no way to do it since she departed for the kingdom's capital to meet the King.

Since he had no other options, Tigre remained quietly obedient.

“... Guess I'll just go with the flow.”

Tigre made that decision and looked at the sky until late at night. During the day, he dozed off on the horse.

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Following Limlisha, Tigre walked down the passage of the household.

“What are you looking about so restlessly for?”

Limlisha gazed back at him in amazement as Tigre looked about like a child.

“Yes, I just thought it is a splendid building.”

“You are an Earl, an aristocrat.”

“I am a poor noble. There is no point comparing my small mansion to this one.”

He responded without any shame. Tigre looked about, admiring the ceiling and floor.

Until now, Tigre had never left Brune Kingdom, and now he was in the province's Imperial Palace. The mosaics which decorated the floor were new to him.

The side facing the courtyard was bathed in a column of soft sunlight. In the vast area, soldiers were working hard, training. It was vibrant.

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“It's a good atmosphere.”

“That is because this is Eleanora-sama's official palace.”

Limlisha answered as if it were natural.

Soldiers patrolled the corridors, and what he assumed were maids and chamberlains strolled about, likely performing their job.

Tigre thought about the girl who was like a younger sister house-sitting his mansion in his absence.

--- *Teita must be worried.*

When he saw her off, he did not expect such a thing to happen.

--- *Batran, and everyone else as well, I hope you made it back safely.*

In his chest, there was impatience.

He wished to return to Alsace as quickly as possible. However, a prisoner who escapes is punishable by death, so he could only remain quiet.

---

They finally left the palace.

He walked for a while before Limlisha stopped her feet.

“... We are here.”

He was brought to a training ground near the rampart.

Eleanora stood with three armed soldiers amongst the forty. She was clothed in shades of blue with her longsword in its argent sheathe at her waist.

“If you make any strange movements... No, please do so. It would save quite a bit of time and effort.”

Limlisha spoke as she let the sound of her sword escape its sheathe at her waist.

Though there was an obvious hostility, Tigre simply ignored it.

*--- It can't be helped. I'm a prisoner now; we were enemies just ten days ago.*

“Hm, you came.”

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Eleanora noticed Tigre and walked up to him cheerfully. She smiled to Tigre first, then Limlisha.

“You've worked hard. Still, it took you quite some time to come here.”

“I apologize. He did not wake up so easily.”

“You didn't wake up?”

Eleanora looked doubtful hearing the story of him waking up only when he had a sword in his mouth. Her shoulders trembled as she held back her laughter.

“Even as a captive, you slept so deeply.”

“He is simply dull.”

At last, Eleanora laughed and turned to Tigre.

“Tigrevurmud Vorn, it's quite a long name for a person of Brune. Does it have an origin?”

“I received an ancestral name. If you find it difficult, you may call me Tigre.”

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Tigre cited the phrase he was accustomed to. He felt odd being called Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn.

Eleanora's face suddenly glowed. The dignity as a Vanadis the soldiers knew was gone; she held the expression appropriate of a girl her age.

"In that case, Ellen is fine as well. I would prefer it if you use that name."

Tigre stared at her involuntarily. She spoke in an intimate manner with a prisoner. Saying it poorly, she was being overly familiar.

"Eleanora-sama."

Though Limlisha reproached her, she showed no sign of fear.

"He's my prisoner. This much is fine, Lim."

"Lim?"

Hearing the name, Tigre looked at Limlisha in surprise

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“I’ll tell you now. She is one of my escorts whose horse you shot down, and she was the girl who took you here from Dinant.”

Certainly, her physique matched.

Though puzzled as to how he should react, Tigre thanked her honestly.

“Though it may be strange of me to say this, thank you for bringing me here safely.”

Tigre had heard stories of prisoners being mocked and assaulted or killed by torture in a convoy. Some died without having a single meal.

However, on the way back from Dinant, Tigre was never abused. He was even given proper food.

Though it may have been because he was Ellen’s captive, Limlisha – that is, Lim, was the one who properly managed him.

She did not respond to Tigre. What had to be done was done.

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However, Lim hid her anger as she was thanked by ignoring Tigre and facing Ellen.

“Eleanora-sama, there is still work to be done today. You should finish your trivial errands early, correct?”

“I know, I know.”

Ellen smiled bitterly and waved. She faced Tigre and smiled deliberately.

“I would like to clarify things first, Tigre... no, Lord Vorn. As per the treaty between our countries, you will be treated as a prisoner of war. If, in fifty days time, the demanded ransom has not been delivered by the Kingdom of Brune, that is, if a ransom has not been paid to me, you will formally become mine as per the agreement. What binds this contract is the name and honor of the God, Radegast. Is this acceptable?”

Though hardly suitable, Tigre nodded reluctantly.

It was a contract held between every country on the treatment of prisoners of war.

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It was made to avoid abuse, humiliation, and, frankly, murder. It was a rule which allowed for negotiations between countries to advance efficiently.

"Well, you might be a bit worried about the ransom, though."

Tigre heard the number come from Ellen's mouth and stood rooted to the spot with his mouth agape.

It was a number close to the total tax revenue raised by Alsace in three years time.

He felt dizzy from the impact.

"... Is it possible to reduce the amount?"

"No."

A flat response.

--- *Well, there's no reason for her to.*

In many cases, the goal of taking an enemy captive was to retrieve a ransom. It was unlikely she would decrease it so easily.

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“You will live here in the Imperial Palace. Needless to say, any attempt to escape will be met with death penalty.”

He was like a fish dying out of water. Tigre desperately searched his memory for the savings within his territory.

It amounted to approximately one year's worth of tax revenue, so it was hardly enough.

*--- If I can speak to Teita or Batran, or perhaps Sir Massas, who is more widely known, they may be able to raise the money*

The preparations for the ransom were, simply put, hopeless.

He felt a pain between his eyes as he thought about his gloomy future. He nearly fainted, but before it happened, Tigre somehow managed to gather strength in his legs.

Supporting his body and limbs with all the strength he could muster, he looked back at Ellen.

*--- I must return to Alsace.*

*I was born and raised there. It is an important land I inherited from my father.*

*I'm worried about the soldiers' safety as well. I'm certain my people are worried.*

*Above all, I promised Teita I would return.*

*I wish to answer their desires.*

“So... What business do you have to call me to such a place?”

Tigre spoke with impudent words and a tone to match. Ellen's crimson eyes smiled happily as she looked at him with admiration.

“Of course, that is not all I called you here for.”

Ellen pointed to a training bow sitting along the wall.

“Shoot an arrow from here and hit that.”

“Is that it?”

Tigre, who was on the defensive, felt it was rather anti-climactic.

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The distance to the target was three hundred alsin (approximately three hundred meters). Even for those skilled with the bow, the distance would seem like a bad joke.

Shooting an arrow at that distance is already in itself a challenge; to also hit the target would make it nothing short of impossible.

However, the distance was not a big deal for Tigre.

Though he did not know what she was plotting, he decided to do it quickly.

One of the soldiers brought a bow and four arrows. The man had delicate features and beautiful, shiny black hair reached down to his shoulders.

After Tigre received the bow and arrow from him, his eyebrows knitted slightly.

“What a terrible bow...”

The material was hardly suitable, and the condition of the grip was poor. The stringing, too, was poorly done. There was also some warping. It was clear what his intention was.

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Ellen glanced at him at a distance like a child, filled with expectation. *Is she not involved? If that's the case, it's unlikely this is a standard bow for the Zhcted Army.*

He was unsure if she knew of this.

An unpleasant thought crossed his mind. Thinking back, the bows in Brune were not that good, either.

*--- It can't be an issue of the maker's ability... In the first place, there is no such profession as a bow craftsman.*

Tigre's bow was made by his father when he was small. The choice of materials, as well, was made according to the knowledge and technology of other countries, such as Zhcted.

The accuracy of his arrow was not due to just Tigre's skill but the quality of the tool as well.

While pretending to check the condition of the bow, he looked at the soldier who passed him the bow in his peripheral vision and saw several soldiers grinning.

“Such a petty trick.”

---

Because he was angry, a murmur leaked from his mouth.

“What is it?”

Lim, who stood nearby, looked at him dubiously. Apparently she had not heard his words. Still, complaining about the quality of the bow as a prisoner of war was cumbersome.

“I wish to confirm something. It is not necessary for me to hit the target with all four arrows, only one, correct?”

“That is a rather timid remark for a person who killed my horse with one arrow.”

Though she thought Tigre was being sarcastic, she remained expressionless. There was no sign of malice. It seems she had not noticed the bow was inferior.

“If your physical condition is poor, I can tell Eleanora-sama to hold this another day.”

“No, I will do it.”

He answered with a strong tone. Tigre set the bow in his hand.

“However, please allow me to hit the target with only one arrow. I am not as confident with an unfamiliar bow.”

Lim bowed in assent and immediately walked to Ellen. After speaking a few words, Ellen looked at him devoid of any dissatisfaction, as if saying “Please begin.”

Tigre nocked the first arrow and released it.

It stalled before it reached the target, falling to the ground less than two hundred alsin away. Laughter and sneers were heard amongst the soldiers.

He did not mind it and released the next arrow.

The hum of the arrow sounded as it flew in an arc. It hit the castle wall, far from the target.

The soldiers laughed loudly. Some shook their shoulders, others looked at him with pity or contempt. Many gazes pierced Tigre.

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“Are you doing this seriously?”

Lim, speaking in an irritated voice, looked to Ellen.

Ellen looked troubled. Though she was trying to properly solve a problem, she looked at him as if she were scolded by a teacher.

“I'll do it.”

Tigre eagerly replied and nocked the third arrow.

“Hey, are you still continuing? You're really willing to make a spectacle of yourself, still?”

“Maybe you'd like a replacement. Though he can reach the target, he can't even shoot straight.”

“Vanadis-sama, did you really make a man like this your captive?”

“This is quite a splendid show. I wonder if something new will be shown tomorrow.”

Though the soldiers deliberately spoke ill, Tigre was not bothered.

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He was accustomed to such abuse. He had received mental abuse incomparable to this many times.

He took a deep breath and looked at the sky for a change of pace, moving his neck around.

In Tigre's vision was a black shadow.

--- *What is that?*

His neck stopped moving and he looked closely.

In an instant, he understood the identity of the shadow. Chills ran down Tigre's spine as he screamed at Ellen.

“Get down!”

--- *An arbalest...!*

It was different from the bow Tigre used. It was a mechanical bow; the bowstring was pulled by a winch and shot with a trigger.

It was difficult to maintain and prone to failure, but it could reach three-hundred-fifty alsin (approximately

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three-hundred-fifty meters) at maximum and could easily pass through shields and armor with enough force for the bolt to come out the other side.

The black shadow on the rampart held one.

A thick bolt was released from the arbalest.

The roar of air sped straight toward Ellen. She had no time to avoid it.

However, Ellen did not panic, nor did she move from her spot.

“--- Arifal!”

Muttering those words like a spell, the sword at her waist gave off a spark, cutting the atmosphere and scattering particles of silver.

In a moment, the air rapidly swelled, like an explosion. A storm raged about her.

Her long hair of silver-white danced with the wind. The bolt, entwined in the intense storm, was thrown far off orbit.

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It passed through the empty space away from her and fell to the ground weakly.

--- *What just happened?*

Tigre stared in blank surprise at Ellen.

It was not a coincidence; that was impossible.

While learning the bow, Tigre learned about the arbalest. He was knowledgeable about the power of the thick bolts. A wind could not conveniently blow it out of its orbit.

“Capture that man!”

Lim shouted. All the soldiers held a bow, however, far from hitting the shadow, they could not even reach the rampart.

The people with a sword or spear ran to the rampart.

The soldier guarding the wall, in response to the commotion, began chasing the shadow.

--- *This has nothing to do with me.*

---

Tigre muttered to himself. Though he shouted on reflex, he was not Ellen's subordinate, nor was he a man of this city.

While thinking that, suddenly, Tigre remembered his first meeting with Ellen.

“You're skilled.”

She smiled as she said so.

*Teita, Batran and his men, my late father, when was I last praised for my bow arm?*

“Should I capture him alive?”

Nocking the arrow, Tigre asked Lim in a flat tone.

“Is this really a situation where you can say that...?”

Grasping the sword with her hand until it went white, Lim stared at the shadow on the rampart in chagrin. She wanted to lead the soldiers, but could not leave Ellen's side.

The shadow ran quickly across the wall. Once he reached the tower, he could quickly escape outside.

---

---

“I understand. I'll get his foot.”

Tigre said those words as he strongly drew his bow to the limit.

After shooting the previous two arrows, he understood its condition perfectly.

--- *At this distance, I won't miss.*

Lim looked at him in doubt.

Then her gaze changed to one of surprise.

The bowstring trembled.

The arrow resounded with a sharp buzz as it drew a large arc, piercing the leg of the shadow.

The shadow fell on the rampart and was caught by the soldiers who finally caught up.

“What... was that?”

One of the soldiers on the rampart looked down at Tigre. No other words would come out.

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The other soldiers, too, looked at Tigre in amazement.

“Impossible. He shot over three hundred alsin (approximately three hundred meters) from that position to the rampart...”

“No, if you think about the height of the tower, it could be even more. No way.”

“I can't believe it... Is that a human skill, or can all people of Brune do this?”

Though the voices showed astonishment and shock, there was clearly admiration in them as well.

There were those rooted to the spot, others looked to the sky, and some covered their forehead with their hand and recited the names of the Gods.

The malice in the training area no longer remained.

“He did something like that... with such a terrible bow.  
..”

The soldiers who passed Tigre the bow were pale with fear.

---

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“--- You got me.”

Tigre shrugged his shoulders. Though he held no emotions in his chest anymore, he was puzzled. He noticed he was bathed in gazes all at once.

The fourth arrow remained in his hand. Though Lim had seen it before, she did not look any differently than the other soldiers. When his eyes met hers, he understood her body was tense.

He looked back at Ellen.

“I'll ask you now. What about the fourth shot?”

“It's enough with this. I'd rather not lose this.”

Ellen's argent hair moved gently as she shook her head

“You did well.”

Ellen smiled at Tigre with sincerity, her sword still sheathed at her waist. A wind blew from somewhere, tickling Tigre's hair.

--- *Just now...*

---

Tigre placed his hand in his hair involuntarily. He thought Ellen had somehow used her longsword to produce the wind.

## The Vanadis' Invitation and the Maid's Prayer

Tigre was called by Ellen the next morning.

After the events from the day before, he immediately returned to his room.

While being guided by Lim, Tigre spoke in embarrassment, his red hair a mess.

“... It won't go down.”

He glanced about anxiously. The soldiers, chamberlains, and maids who passed by all looked at him oddly.

Whether it was out of awe or in interest, he could not tell. Tigre had never been looked at with such eyes, so he was confused.

“Why is everyone staring at me?”

He asked Lim when it became unbearable. She twisted her neck a little and looked at Tigre with a side glance, responding with an aloof tone.

“Eleanora-sama will explain.”

---

--- Well, whatever. I guess I'll find out shortly.

Before long, Lim stopped before a certain door.

“Eleanora-sama, I have brought Earl Vorn.”

She spoke as she knocked on the door. A response was returned immediately as they heard “Enter.”

Lim pushed open the door and told Tigre to follow her

It was an office.

Though it was a small room, a regal carpet was laid on the floor. The candelabra, the desk, and the chair were all golden knit rattan. The windows were large.

“Please wait a moment. I will be finished shortly.”

Ellen sat at the desk, her pen running across the document.

The documents were piled up like a mountain at the side of the desk and were likely already processed. Tigre leaked a breath of admiration seeing the large amount.

Two flags decorated the wall behind her.

One on display was the Black Dragon Flag, the symbol of Zhcted Kingdom. <sup>Zirnitra</sup>

The other was a flag with a sword of silver on a black background. This was Ellen's flag. Tigre remembered seeing it on the battlefields of Dinant.

Beneath the flag, the longsword in its sheathe leaned against the wall. It was placed in a position where Ellen could grasp it immediately.

Ellen looked down at the document and suddenly frowned.

It seems she wrote something incorrectly. She crumpled the paper in a ball and threw it into the waste basket in the corner of the room in a violent manner.

The ball of paper dropped to the floor beside the waste basket.

Ellen stared at the paper, perhaps out of anger, or perhaps she was not thinking of anything at all.

Tigre was not sure why Ellen had such an expression. She looked down at the other papers, her expression now hidden. Lim picked it up.

“Paper is a precious resource. Please do not waste it.”

Ellen was scolded like a child. She returned to her documents and completed her work quickly.

“Did it take time to wake him up today?”

“No, he awoke when I called for him.”

Lim responded. Tigre diverted his eyes awkwardly.

Actually, he jumped out of bed the moment Lim stood in front of his room.

*--- It was the same feeling... as if confronting a feral creature while hunting in the mountain or woods at night. I felt signs of a dangerous beast.*

In other words, Tigre's instinct recognized her dangerous existence. Of course, because he could not say such things, he remained silent.

“Are you now conscious that you are a prisoner of war ?”

Ellen stood up, laughing like a child. Taking the longsword in her hand, she walked around to the front of the desk and faced Tigre.

“I apologize for yesterday.”

She lowered her head seriously, surprising Tigre. He looked back at Lim who remained silent. It seems she was telling him it would be fine to turn around.

“What do you mean?”

“The bow given to you. I did not think they would give you such a poor one.”

--- *Like I thought, it was badly made.*

Though Tigre was relieved, he was amazed by the words which followed.

“The three men who did that will have their heads taken---”

“No, wait a moment.”

---

Tigre interrupted Ellen's words in a panic.

"Certainly, they played a terrible trick, but isn't that going a bit far?"

"That trick... Aren't you angry?"

Ellen looked at Tigre curiously.

"Those three laughed at you before many others and tried to dishonor you. They will compensate with their deaths."

--- *That's overdoing it.*

Certainly, he was angry at the time.

However, when he looked straight at Ellen, Tigre could not say so. He would not feel good if they died for something like that.

"Will you allow me to forgive them?"

Ellen looked dissatisfied, though she did not refuse.

"If you wish it, I will do so. It will not happen again."

Her skirt moved as she turned back to the window frame and sat on it. Ellen held her longsword in her arms and crossed her shapely legs.

His eyes were attracted to her white thighs. Tigre consciously looked.

Her skirt came into sight, and above it, her belly. He could not afford to stare at her chest – after all, he was a prisoner in enemy territory.

Tigre looked further up. A simple face stared at him.

“By the way, why did you have me do such a thing yesterday?”

“That's right, I never told you... Lim.”

Lim's name was called. Her blue Irises held an unfriendly expression as she reluctantly responded.

“Including me, many of the soldiers expressed frustration that our commanding officer and general, Eleanora-sama, who has not once taken a prisoner in her many campaigns, decided to hold you captive.”

“So I'm your first prisoner of war.”

---

“Yes. Because of that, a foolish rumor went about the soldiers.”

“Rumor?”

“The rumor was that I fell in love with you at a glance.”

Tigre went wide-eyed hearing Ellen's words.

“A love in the battlefield, a love that arose between enemies... It seems like something out of a drama, everyone enjoys talking about such things. Well, perhaps it wasn't a mistake. It was not quite love, but I was certainly charmed.”

“You were charmed... by me?”

“Your skill with the bow. Unfortunately, it was not you.”

Ellen responded with a radiant smile. Tigre returned the joke with a shrug of his shoulder.

“Thank you. It would be embarrassing since we had not spoken.”

---

“Can a woman like me not fall in love without speaking to you?”

“It requires time to see my merit.”

“Though your peculiar habit of sleeping late was noticed immediately.”

Lim attacked his known weakness. Ellen continued pressing Tigre relentlessly.

“So, how many women have you fallen in love with until now?”

Tigre silently raised both hands in surrender.

Unless he was particularly handsome or a wealthy noble, he would have no reason to encounter a young noble girl. It was impossible for him.

“In any case, many soldiers have overreacted to the rumor. We hoped to stop it at its source.”

Ellen turned her ill-natured yet joyful eyes to Lim, like a cat teasing a rat.

“I merely stated there was a rumor.”

---

Lim's expression did not change, but she caught Ellen's glance and responded.

"I simply needed to have the associated parties come out. I figured the quickest way to shut them up was to show them your skill. It was more effective than I anticipated."

"You only had to explain it to me when we met."

"It's fine, since the result spoke for itself. Was there a need to tell you? You are a prisoner I took from Dinant for a ransom. Of course, it was my benevolence that kept you alive, though really, you entertained me for a bit."

"I entertained you?"

Tigre frowned hearing the unexpected words. Ellen nodded, her face showing her sincerity.

"To begin with, that battle was terrible. It was disappointing and trivial."

Her face was full of disappointment. Ellen spat those words out; the wind blew her silver-white hair softly from the window.

---

“We had five thousand troops. You had five times that, twenty-five thousand. Before entering the battlefield, I used all my wisdom to prepare many plans, since I thought it would be a difficult battle. Still, it ended in only half a day.”

“Isn't it good to win that easily?”

“Lim said the same thing.”

Tigre noticed Lim half-glaring at Ellen. Her eyes unwillingly turned away.

“I also think it never hurts to have an easy win; however, we won with only the initial plan. It was boring.”

“The first plan, I see, the surprise pincer attack from behind at dawn.”

This was confirmation rather than a question. Though Tigre judged it to be the case at the time, he did not see the entire battlefield.

Sure enough, Ellen nodded.

“I scouted the area beforehand. The Brune Army was divided into the forward and the rear guard. Though the vanguard's morale was high, the same could not be said of the rear. I attracted the forward's attention with four thousand troops and attacked the rear with the rest. It was more fragile than I expected, since I could fight after dividing my troops. The Prince died as a bonus as well.”

“His Highness died...?”

Tigre spoke up involuntarily. It was his first time hearing this.

“Were you close?”

“Impossible.”

Tigre shook his head after collecting himself.

“I spoke to him once long ago. That was all.”

As an Earl who lived at the edge of the kingdom, it was impossible for him to become intimate with the Prince. Tigre was hardly shocked, though.

He was not meant for war.

---

Looking at things from a distance, the Prince had always given a delicate impression.

“Do you hold a grudge against me?”

Because her voice was earnest and she looked at Tigre seriously, Tigre answered sincerely.

“It would be a lie to say there were no ill feelings, but it was a battle. I, too, killed soldiers of Zhcted.”

However, he may not be able to maintain such a firm attitude should he hear of Massas or Batran's death.

*--- Though an aristocrat of Brune, I hardly have a strong loyalty to the Royal Family...*

“I see.”

Ellen exhaled slightly and gave an expression of relief.

“Let's continue our conversation. When the death of the Prince was spread, the vanguard collapsed. The enemy ran away, and we routed them out. It was disappointing.”

---

Though he could not understand her disappointment, he felt it selfish. Still, Tigre nodded slightly.

“At that time, I met you.”

A pair of bright red eyes gazed softly at Tigre.

“I was impressed you could accurately shoot an arrow from a distance of three hundred alsin... In a situation where all your allies were dead or fleeing, you retained your will to fight and acted without signs of desperation. You acted calmly. I was surprised you were trying to kill me. Really, I liked it.”

Lim, hearing those words, gave a sigh.

“Even so, please do not rush forward on your own.”

“Well, it would have been dangerous if we didn't approach him, right? We were lucky he only had four arrows.”

“It is as you say, but that is not your role, Eleanora-sama.”

Lim coldly rejected Ellen's protests.

The brows of the Vanadis with silver-white hair looked troubled as she looked to Tigre for help.

“If it was someone other than me, are you certain they would survive?”

--- *Her expression changes so much.*

During battle, he saw her as a dignified commander. Until a moment ago, her expressions were like a child, and now she was looking for a companion in her mischief.

“Is this really the situation to say that?”

“An arrow shot from your bow would be fatal, I think you can say that.”

“If you're the one saying that, it sounds sarcastic.”

If Ellen said it, it sounded sarcastic to Tigre. If Tigre said it, it sounded sarcastic to Lim. Lim exuded a strong silence. Though Tigre appealed to her with a glance, he was ignored. Not understanding why, Tigre looked to Ellen.

---

“When you rushed at me, what I needed to do did not change. I only aimed at you and shot. Even if I could not move from my position, the arrow should have reached you. That is why the result would not change. It was my defeat.”

“You obediently accepted your defeat.”

“You struck down an arrow with your sword, it was my first time seeing such a thing. I thought only heroes of legend could do that.”

“Your arrow accurately hit the forehead of Lim's horse. I thought you would aim at mine as well.”

Though she thought she would be victorious, her attitude was not unfitting. Ellen tenderly stroked the sheathe of the sword in her arms.

“When I struck down your arrow, my heart was beating violently. When you shot your second arrow, I couldn't help but admire your skill in being able to accurately shoot at the same position in such a short time ; I was impressed. If you had a third arrow, you really may have hit me with our distance shrinking.”

---

Ellen took a deep breath, her throat now dry.

Lim poured water from a pitcher into a ceramic cup on the desk and presented it to her. She drank it down in one gulp and turned back to Tigre.

“I thought it would be regrettable to kill you. Since it's not my hobby to spend my time leisurely talking on the battlefield, I brought you to LeitMeritz for negotiation.”

She crossed her legs, now entirely off the floor. Ellen wore a smile, her red eyes looking straight at Tigre.

“Will you serve me?”

This time, Tigre looked at Ellen's face in surprise.

“I will treat you as an Earl of Brune. You will be given an appropriate salary and title. Though I can't give you territory, that may change depending on your work. You can also earn a peerage and high-ranking title. Unlike in Brune, your distinguished services will not be discriminated against.”

---



“... Are you serious?”

It was an attractive proposition. It was difficult to believe.

Due to the tension and excitement, his face turned red.

His palms were sweaty, his chest pounded violently.

Though small, Ellen firmly bowed her head in assent.

“I want you.”

Tigre's face turned even more red. He played with his bangs to hide it.

There were no signs of a lie in Ellen's words.

For a lie, it was far too convoluted.

*--- In Brune, I can't expect such treatment.*

In that country, there was contempt for the bow, and it was a large obstacle. In battles against other countries, the aristocrats who consisted of archers had to help.

That much was a given.

---

However, when the war ended, not a single word of appreciation was given, nor was there a reward.

“Far beyond the reach of the enemy's swords and spears, you can shoot an arrow. Compared to the soldiers who fight up close, what can you do?”

An aristocrat who organized an archery unit could not overturn the situation.

What more could Tigre, a minor aristocrat, do?

It was different in this country.

Ellen, at least, evaluated him fairly.

For an archer, it was desirable.

“I refuse.”

However, Tigre answered in such a manner.

“I am thankful for your invitation. I doubt I will ever receive such an invitation again, even if I lived another century.”

---

“Then why have you refused my hand?”

Ellen did not show any disappointment, she simply asked for a reason.

“There is a place I must protect, a place I must return to.”

Tigre continued with a strong tone.

“Alsace. It is a territory I inherited from my father. It is far from the center of the country and is amongst the forests and mountains. There are only four villages and a small town... However, I cannot throw it aside.”

“Alsace...?”

Hearing that word, Ellen's beautiful eyebrows knit slightly.

“Doesn't that territory border this country?”

“It is separated by only one mountain.”

Tigre nodded and responded. Ellen sat on the window frame once again.

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“Your spirit is praiseworthy, but will you not think of the future?”

Ellen spoke up, her expression thrown off.

“You are here now, and you could lead a good life... however, if the ransom is not paid by the deadline, I will sell you to a merchant from Muozinel.”

A cold sweat spread on Tigre's forehead.

Muozinel was the kingdom of heat which lay to the southeast of Brune and south of Zhcted Kingdom.

The peoples' skin was dark, and it was established one hundred years after Brune and Zhcted.

If a ransom was not paid, in order to receive money, a prisoner of war was sold to Muozinel. It was a time-tested method.

“So you understand. Even then, are you prepared to live a miserable life?”

“If, if the ransom is not paid, the decision is yours.”

Though he started strong, Tigre's voice still trembled.

---

“Oh? Yesterday, you had the negotiation skills to demand I reduce the ransom. Seeing that, I thought you were prepared, even for death. I thought it would be a shame to let such a brave man die a pitiable death. I'm surprised.”

Sure of her superiority, with her arms crossed while gripping her sword, Ellen glared at Tigre. He had difficulty responding.

“... I can hardly lower my head superficially and look for a chance to run away.”

Lim, who refrained from intruding, looked on in silence.

Though Tigre was exhausted from Ellen's attacks, the expression she had was unusual as she turned to Lim and blinked several times. Afterward, she silently shrugged her shoulder.

Lim looked at Ellen questioningly for a moment, but said nothing.

“The business from before, have you heard anything?”

When asked, Tigre recalled momentarily.

---

“Yesterday, who was the man I shot?”

“He was an assassin after my life.”

Tigre opened his mouth widely hearing Ellen's careless answer.

“It's hardly unusual. They appear every month. I've become quite bored of them.”

“You're bored with assassins...”

Given Ellen's buoyant attitude, it really was a frequent occurrence. She spoke of it as if it were an animal call or insect making noise.

It was humorous seeing how tense he was yesterday.

“However, it was quite dangerous yesterday. I wish to express my gratitude.”

“Who is the mastermind?”

“He committed suicide after that, so we don't know. Even though you took the effort to capture him, that happened. Sorry.”

---

“It's not a big deal, but is it okay not knowing? His partner, that is.”

“So you're worried.”

Surprised by his response, Ellen's bright red eyes blinked. After that, she smiled sweetly.

“How cute, you.”

“No... It's something unrelated to me, but it's your enemy...”

He was embarrassed and immersed in her smile. Tigre, in confusion, tried to return to the conversation.

“Even if you say that, there's more than one or two. The power of the Vanadis is something exclusive to the King, it is a large power. It's not like I particularly caused anyone a grudge.”

*--- Is it courage? Resolution... It really must be a big deal, then.*

Tigre gave a sound of admiration. If the concerned party said that much, he would not pursue any further.

“In the end... The assassin's bolt, why did it not hit you?”

“I wonder why?”

Ellen tilted her head cutely and played dumb.

“You should understand just by looking. Fortunately, the wind blew the arrow away.”

“Then Arifal, is it some spell which changes the movement of the wind?”

He clearly heard it. Though Tigre returned Ellen's gaze, she did not flinch or show any sign of worry.

“If you're interested, you should investigate yourself. I'm not so kind a teacher that I would teach a poor student.”

“... Are you giving me the freedom to act?”

“It would be troublesome if you got sick from staying in your room all day. I will permit you to walk around in public, so long as you are supervised. However, should

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you approach the ramparts near the Imperial Palace, I will consider you to be attempting an escape. Anything else?"

Tigre shook his head. In his situation, only a desperate future awaited if he tried to escape, but if he remained, he would not be confined.

"I see. Then you may return to your room."

Tigre left the office and followed Lim.

"Ah, are you taking me to my room?"

"No, I must speak to Eleanora-sama, so I shall leave it to another person."

Lim denied his question with an unfriendly face.

“Please tell me one thing. Why did you not accept Eleanora-sama's condition, even if only in form?”

Lim's blue eyes looked at Tigre with a quizzical gaze. He answered her question seriously.

“To do so would mean betraying Alsace. Then I would also be betraying the Vanadis.”

“You are a captive. Eleanora-sama is your enemy. It would not be a betrayal.”

“Even then, it would be deception.”

Tigre simply shrugged his shoulders.

“She was earnest in her offer, so I considered the proposal honestly.”

“I see.”

Doubt disappeared in her blue eyes and was replaced by another emotion.

---

Lim called the nearby soldier on patrol to a stop and ordered him to send Tigre to his room before returning to the office.

Ellen sat before the desk, pouring water from the pitcher.

“Lord Tigrevurmud has been seen off.”

“Good work.”

Taking a sip of water, Ellen spoke words of appreciation. Without any introductory remarks, Lim asked a question.

“Is it fine to give him the freedom to move about?”

Her eyebrows showed her doubt. Ellen watched the face of her unsociable subordinate.

“I restricted it to public places. Are there any problems ?”

“Alsace is his territory, directly across the mountains. He might escape from LeitMeritz.”

Lim did not think Tigre would try to escape.

--- *Still, others may think differently.*

From his conversation with Ellen, Lim held those thoughts about Tigre. If nothing else, she thought he would remain quiet.

However, it is impossible to predict the future.

“Certainly it is bordering our lands, but the distance is not so short that he could reach it within a day or two. Besides, he does not even know the lay of the land.”

“When he became a prisoner, from Dinant to the Imperial Palace, he looked up at the skies every night until he slept... He was looking at the stars.”

“So he was gazing at the stars, did he write a poem?”

Ellen laughed as she teased Lim. She understood precisely what Lim meant.

By looking at the stars every night, he could confirm his position.

“If he looks at a map, he can easily find the roads.”

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“Though you say he could escape so simply, won't it be troublesome? It's not easy to slip out of the Imperial Palace, and, though he is free to act, he is under surveillance.”

“Let us assume he is able to slip away from surveillance. What then?”

“This entire city is surrounded by walls. If he managed to escape, we need only close the gate immediately.”

“Suppose he broke through the gate.”

“... Even if that is the case, it would take at least ten days to walk to the Vosyes Mountains. Also, there is only one path across that series of steep mountains. Even if he managed to make it past the gate, we would simply have to block that path. I can't possibly imagine him being able to do anything more.”

Lim did not back down, even if she explained that far in advance.

She could not stand aside indifferently in this argument.

“However, he is thinking of his lands. You cannot assert that he will do nothing reckless.”

“In other words, you are telling me to prepare for the worst. If you are going that far, then I will tell you, I am prepared to kill him. Is that enough for you?”

“Thank you.”

Ellen leaned toward Lim, who was bowing deeply, her eyes opened widely, deep in observation.

“Yes?”

“No, I thought you disliked Tigre a lot... You did not have a good first impression, I suppose. However, I don't feel that much enmity. It isn't as bad anymore, I guess.”

“...”

Lim did not respond. It was as Ellen said. Her insight was certainly surprising.

“There is something I wish to confirm.”

In order to change the conversation, Lim avoided answering.

“Were you seriously considering making him your subordinate?”

“Are you dissatisfied?”

“Certainly, he is an excellent archer, but the use of a bow is only useful when gathered in numbers. How you could use him alone, I could not even guess.”

In a battle, having a line of archers shower arrows on the enemy as the armies approached for close-quarters combat was normal.

Though shooting enemies from a distance could work, the principle weapon in battle fell to short-distance arms such as swords. The bow and arrow was not recognized as part of the main force.

“Would you like to hear?”

Ellen's face was like a child that thought of something fun to play. She explained proudly.

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“You have one thousand soldiers guard him by assaulting the enemy force.”

“Yes.”

“While the soldiers are holding off the enemy, he can shoot and kill the enemy Generals and Commanders. With the right timing, he withdraws. By doing this, even against tens of thousands of troops, he could throw the enemy into disarray. An army without a Commander is like a herd of sheep without a shepherd. It would easily collapse with just a little force.”

Her mouth was loose, as if she had already won.

“Are you saying that seriously?”

Though Lim's expression did not change, her voice sounded amazed with a mix of coldness. Ellen sighed as she crossed her arms.

“In any era, innovative tactics are things difficult to understand.”

“There are also many tactics rejected by our predecessors because there are fatal flaws.”

---

“... Well, I was half joking.”

Of course, she was hinting that she was half serious. Ellen looked up at Lim from her desk.

“My battle is not one that is always on the battlefield where armies collide. There are times where individual strength is necessary as well, Lim. Tell me, how far can you shoot an arrow?”

“At most, one-hundred-sixty alsin. However, if I wish to inflict a wound, one hundred alsin is my limit.”

“And what of the greatest archer in the Imperial Palace?”

“That would be Rurick. His record is a distance of two-hundred-seventy alsin.”

Rurick was the man who passed the inferior bow to Tigre out of mischief.

“In other words, Rurick's ability with the bow is inferior to Tigre's.”

Confronted with the cold fact, Lim fell silent.

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In fact, his skill was experienced that day in Dinant.

Tigre shot an arrow from a long distance such that Lim did not notice at all. She had fallen from the horse, but it was possible she could have died.

*--- Even if I had noticed, I would not be able to knock the arrow away like Eleanora-sama.*

“The bow is looked down upon in Brune, so I didn't think there would be a man of such caliber. No, perhaps his talent was buried because they dislike archery. Still, I am serious in wanting to employ Tigre. He is strong. That value should be sufficient.”

“Lord Tigrevurmud is.”

“Tigre's good, right? He also said so as well.”

“... Lord Tigrevurmud is.”

Though in a thorny tone, Lim responded with a strong tone.

“Perhaps Eleanora-sama would like Alsace.”

“Maybe I should attack Alsace.”

---

Lim sighed, since her Lord said such terrible things so smoothly.

Furthermore, it was unclear if she meant it, since she was smiling.

“I will look after the boy for the time being. I'd like to see Tigre's reaction, since the ransom won't necessarily be prepared immediately. There's still time. Let me watch him a bit longer.”

“... As you wish.”

After bowing, Lim left the office. Ellen picked up the longsword leaning against the wall.

As she stroked the sheath, a small wind blew, as if the sword responded to Ellen's movement.

“Love at first sight, is it...? Impossible.”

She smiled bitterly at the thought. Placing the sword against the wall, Ellen returned to her work.

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Beyond the forest which spread to the west, the sun began to set.

“... Today, Tigre-sama did not return.”

Standing on the second floor balcony outside Tigre's room, Teita let out a sigh as she looked at the sky which shined a dark red.

This was Alsace in Brune Kingdom. It was Tigre's home.

Teita was left alone to take care of the house. It had been more than twenty days.

Since she quickly took care of her meals and the cleaning, she often finished before noon. There was also a stockpile of food, water, and alcohol.

If Tigre returned, she would pinch and raise her skirt immediately. With his room cleaned perfectly and a meal with alcohol prepared, he could relax immediately.

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She also confirmed the contents of the medicine cabinet in case he was injured, and she was prepared to boil water immediately.

However, Tigre had not returned.

With her hand on the edge of the balcony, watching the sun and the blood-colored sky, Teita was attacked by a severe unease. *It is possible Tigre-sama is...*

*He could not have died.*

*He will return soon.*

The Brune Army suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Zhcted Army in Dinant. Since then, many evenings had passed, and the news of Prince Regnas' death had spread.

“It's fine. Tigre-sama said it would be safe in the rear.”

Even if she tried to persuade herself, her anxiety did not disappear.

Before long, the sun set. Teita left the house with a lantern in her possession.

She locked the doors beforehand.

Tigre's mansion was in the heart of the town of Celesta. Although it was called a town, it was not much larger than a village.

Beneath the night sky, Teita quietly walked into the town wrapped in gray. Teita moved humbly, her feet stopping before a small temple.

When she knocked on the wooden door, a wrinkled old woman, whose body was covered in a shrine maiden's garb, appeared.

“You've come, Teita.”

“I will be in your care, today.”

When Teita bowed, her chestnut-brown twin tails shook. The old shrine maiden smiled and invited Teita inside the temple.

Built out of stone and wood, it was a small temple. The elder woman led Teita to a small room.

In the room was a bucket filled with purified water and a thin, pure, snow-white shrine maiden's clothing.

---

When she closed the door, Teita took care to remove the maid uniform she wore.

She undid her belt and apron and removed her long-sleeved coat and long skirt.

Her pure white body shined in the dim light of the lantern.

Though short for her age, she developed a body appropriate for a woman. Her arms and legs, though firm from her every day life, still retained their feminine softness.

“...”

Her body shook from the cold night air moving about the room.

Although she had done this every day, she was still unaccustomed to it.

Removing her undergarments, Teita was now the same as the day she was born. The only thing remaining were the ribbons in her chestnut-brown hair.

---

She squeezed water from the cloth and carefully wiped her body.

When Teita finished, she donned the pure-white shrine maiden's clothes.

The old shrine maiden wore clothes for every day purposes. They were unlike these adornments meant for prayer, the fabric was thin enough to show the curves of her body.

It was slightly better in the summer, with the cold air hitting Teita's body.

Teita left the room, tightly embracing herself.

She faced the altar in the interior of the temple.

The altar was a semi-spherical recess. Ten statues of the Pantheon of the Gods followed along the curve.

“Oh Gods in the Heavens.”

Kneeling before the altar, Teita held her hands together in worship. Her correct posture showed she completed her training as a shaman.

---

“Please grant Tigre-sama your blessings and return him safely.”

Since Tigre left the house, this prayer had become a daily routine for Teita.

Though Teita was a shrine maiden's daughter, she disliked learning to read and write in the temple, and she was not fond of singing hymns to the Gods.

She preferred spending her time with the woman working as a maid at the Lord's mansion. The reason was simple, the woman had always made candy for Teita.

She also seemed fond of performing her work. She cooked, cleaned, and sewed, something suited to Teita.

Teita walked to the mansion many times to visit the woman, and that is how she met Tigre.

As the only other child in the mansion, she and Tigre often talked to each other.

Teita came to play every day. Before she was aware, it was her role to wake Tigre, who slept until noon every day as a child.

“Tigre-sama. I helped auntie bake sweets. Do you want to eat with me?”

Teita presented a half-cooked, half-scorched cake she had baked.

A few days later, Tigre returned from a hunt and presented a gift to her, saying, “These gloves were made from the fur of rabbits. Thank you, Teita.”

Whenever Teita's training as a shrine maiden was difficult, she complained to Tigre.

She could only complain to Tigre.

“Tigre, isn't studying to be the Lord difficult?”

“It's not hard. I wish to follow after my father as his only son.”

Tigre added the last words as a small joke to her.

She repeated her training as a shrine maiden and watched, and sometimes helped, the woman work. She spoke to her mother when she turned 11.

“I don't want to be a shrine maiden. I want to work as a maid in the mansion.”

Naturally, her mother strongly opposed. Tigre was the one to put in a good word for her.

“Isn't it fine? It's fine if Teita doesn't focus only on her shrine maiden duties.”

The words of the Lord's son could not be ignored.

After all, knowledge and manners were necessary for a shrine maiden. According to the art of prayer, every tenth day, the maiden must return to the temple and offer prayer to the shrine. Accepting those conditions, Teita began work as a maid that summer.

Before then, Teita only had vague feelings toward Tigre. During that summer, those feelings completely took form.

---

Finishing her prayer and changing from her maiden's clothing, she left the shrine.

The golden moon shined brightly, shining its light on the cold ground.

Though she prayed every day, she was not sure they were heard by the Gods. Still, her anxiety was relieved.

She felt better.

“I will return tomorrow.”

Teita rushed home as she murmured to herself.

Against the night sky, a black silhouette came into view, stopping Teita's feet.

She could see two people before the fence surrounding the residence.

Teita was wary for a moment, but ran forward with a joyful look upon recognizing their identity.

“Batran-san! Massas-sama! Welcome back!”

Light shined from the bronze chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Teita invited the two old men to the sitting room. She brought out water while the tea was being prepared.

“Mu, thank you, Teita.”

Massas and Batran's clothes were worn and covered in mud and dust. Their gray hair was stiff and blotted in dry sweat.

They returned to Celesta after Teita set out for the temple. It seems they missed each other.

Batran, from the reserve funds left by Tigre, paid the soldiers. Since then, the two waited for Teita to return.

“Seven of our soldiers died, and thirty were injured. Though we were crushed by the enemy, most of our men escaped.”

Batran laughed weakly.

“You don't need to worry. We have treated the wounded and buried the dead.”

---

Massas said this while looking at Batran.

Teita was anxious.

Between the two, Tigre's name was not mentioned. They were likely easing her into bad news.

Involuntarily, she leaned forward.

“What of Tigre-sama? Surely...”

“His death... is unlikely.”

Massas, drenched in sweat, gave an ambiguous answer.

“I'm sorry, Teita.”

Tears floated to Batran's wrinkled face as he bowed.

“The Young Lord was captured by the enemy.”

Teita held her apron with both hands, holding back her shock.

“He was caught... What do you mean?”

“I shall explain it for you.”

---

Seeing Batran look apologetic, Massas opened his mouth. He received a ransom from Eleanora, a Vanadis of Zhcted Kingdom.

Upon hearing the ransom amount, Teita nearly fainted again.

“Even if everything in this mansion was sold, it is impossible to gather that much!”

The amount was approximately three years worth of tax revenue from Alsace. There was a reserve of approximately one year, however, it took them a long time to save that much.

Furthermore, they had no time.

Ten days had passed since Eleanora's demand was delivered to Brune Kingdom. Only forty days remained.

“If we cannot afford the ransom, what will happen to Tigre-sama?”

“... Some prisoners, should they have some skill, must serve the enemy. Many become married to a local woman and spend their life as a prisoner of war.”

---

Most were sold to merchants of a foreign country. Their whereabouts were often lost afterward. The example Massas gave was actually quite a rare occurrence.

“That can't be!”

Teita shouted loudly and struck the table. Batran and Massas' cups shook.

“It can't be, Tigre-sama won't be coming back! And getting a wife...”

“W-Well, that's only if the time has passed. It does not necessarily mean it will happen immediately.”

Surprised by Teita's threatening attitude, Massas added those words weakly.

“... I wonder if we can steal it somehow.”

Batran spoke up in a dark voice.

“Um, what of His Majesty?”

Without any plan, Teita asked Massas.

“Will His Majesty not help Tigre-sama?”

Massas fell silent with a scowl. That was his answer.

Massas wanted to say something, but he would find it difficult to be honest.

There were a considerable number of casualties amongst his soldiers. Also, as an aristocrat of Brune, it was necessary he attend Prince Regnas' funeral.

The heavy silence dominated the room.

“... I see.”

Teita broke the silence.

“I will go around the towns and villages to borrow money.”

The two elder men looked up, hearing her determined words.

“Even if it is a single silver, even a copper coin, we can gather a lot. Tigre-sama has been the Lord for two years. Surely some will lend their aid.”

---

Massas nodded in assent.

“I understand. Then, Teita, Batran, I will also try to find someone we may rely on.”

“Thank you very much, Massas-sama!”

Teita smiled and bowed deeply.

She felt she could see some hope.

--- *Tigre-sama, I will surely save you. Please wait!*

## The Life of a Public Official

It had been ten days since Tigre declined Ellen's invitation.

His life as a captive was peaceful and monotonous.

First of all, he would wake up at noon.

He called the soldier in charge of him and headed to the kitchen.

The soldier's name was Rurick, the man who gave him a poor bow. For some reason, though, he had no hair on his head.

Though his black hair, which went down to his shoulders, suited his natural face and gentlemanly manners, his bald head was also impressive.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. In the future, I, Rurick, will serve to monitor you. Well, I'd rather you not have an unpleasant time, so please call for me."

He had a refreshing smile and bowed, which took Tigre by surprise. After hesitating, Tigre decided to speak frankly.

---

“Um... Your hair?”

“It was shaved.”

A curt response.

“Vanadis-sama ordered I take what I valued most after my life. Normally, I would be put to death. It is thanks to Lord Tigrevurmud's benevolence that I still live.”

--- *So it was because of me.*

Tigre wanted to apologize somehow, but Rurick suddenly kneeled down.

“Although it is late, please excuse my shameless actions and accept my words of gratitude. Also, I was truly impressed with your superhuman skills with the bow. I am quite confident of my archery, yet now I feel it immature.”

He spoke seriously.

“I, I see. Well, I'm in your care.”

Though Tigre learned of what happened earlier, he still felt anxious. Rurick noticed his expression and acted as if it were not a cumbersome task at all.

He was unexpectedly friendly.

As he reached the kitchen, lunch had already finished, so Tigre took the leftovers.

He was able to eat immediately.

The maids in the kitchen were willing to make food for him, but Tigre could eat immediately and he felt better, since he was not so mindful of the time.

“Tigre-san, I'm sorry, but could you help me?”

Occasionally, he was requested to help for some of the kitchen tasks such as skinning rabbits, birds, and elk. Tigre took to the tasks happily.

“What do you need done?”

“We'll be using Elk tonight.”

After guiding him to the back of the kitchen, Tigre was handed a knife.

A splendid deer lay on the table in the corner. Tigre quickly and cleanly dismantled it.

He peeled the fur, cut the meat into even cuts, and sorted out the entrails.

While Tigre moved methodically, not even raising an eyebrow to the sight or odor, Rurick looked on in admiration at his finesse.

“No matter how many times I see it, you're very good. How many times have you done this?”

“I suppose I'm accustomed to it, since I have spent many days living in the mountains.”

Since bringing his game home for storage was not suitable, he often did such things on the spot.

In fact, judging livestock, such as cattle and pigs, was something Tigre was poor at. Although he could make direct comparisons, there was still a large difference in his skill set.

---

When he was finished, Tigre left the kitchen and was rewarded with copper coins, a cake, and a fine wine.

He then began exploring the area.

He continued to walk through the Imperial Palace until Rurick said, "It's forbidden to go any further." He made sure to remember.

When the sun began to set, they headed to the training area to practice archery.

"Even in the kitchen, is it really good to let a prisoner get a hold of an edged tool so easily?"

While practicing with the bow, he asked that question.

Tigre was confused at how easily he obtained such permission.

"It hurts me to say this, but should you have showed any sign of holding someone hostage, I was to cut you down without mercy."

Rurick spoke with an earnest face.

“I’m sure you know this, but when handling the creature, not once did you bring the knife toward another person. If you had attempted to attack anyone, I would have placed myself before them.”

“But isn’t that dangerous?”

“I am aware.”

Rurick’s bald head reflected in the sun. He laughed in a refreshing manner.

“Honestly, even with your skill, you do not miss training. Really, I am impressed again.”

“Ah, yes...”

Being praised in such a manner, Tigre was embarrassed. It was difficult for him to say anything more.

So as to not dull his archery, Tigre continued training. Some day, he wished to win against Ellen. Tigre’s defeat in Dinant was a considerable shock.

He was training with Rurick and the other archers.

---

Soon, Tigre was in a position to teach the others, from his posture to how to ready his aim, even to materials and maintenance of the bow.

“For someone like Lord Tigrevurmud, I did not think you would put much effort into the bow. With your amazing skill, you could use an inferior bow.”

“Still, if you wish for the arrow to fly better, it is best to use good materials. I've broken bows and bowstrings myself...”

“Are expensive things better?”

“Even if you use one that is difficult to obtain, doesn't it come down to how easily you can repair it? Do you know what bamboo is? It is a plant which grows in a country far to the east, across the sea.”

“I've seen it once. I wasn't sure whether it was a tree or not.”

“Though the material is nice, it's rare and difficult to obtain, so it's expensive.”

“I'd like a bow made from a Dragon.”

---

Rurick smiled wryly while shrugging his shoulders toward Tigre.

He referred to something that did not exist.

The Dragon itself exists.

They live deep in forests and high in the mountains. They inhabit areas which are not crowded.

Both Batran and Massas have lived more than fifty years in a secluded land, yet they had never seen a wild Dragon.

The Dragon does not exist. There are many that think they are a legend, but they are hardly few in number.

During one hunt, Tigre encountered a Dragon. Even when recalling the memory, he felt a chill.

It was that kind of experience.

Nothing was as hard as a Dragon's body.

It was impossible to process. The nails, fangs, scales, no matter what, were difficult to work. Blades would shatter, hammers would break. Even if heated for tens of days, nothing would happen.

Therefore, nothing made from a Dragon existed.

Such objects appear only in legends and fairy tales.

After a half koku (approximately one hour), when training ended, the other soldiers spoke to him.

“Oh, Rurick, Tigre-san, are you free?”

It was an invitation to play. They would play games like cards, chess, and other such games.

Since they fundamentally bet, Tigre had to borrow money from Rurick at the beginning.

“All cash in hand and ready to cry. I'm in.”

“Tigre-san, are you going to beg Rurick for money again? Or perhaps you'll steal some wine or cake from the kitchen.”

---

“You, how many times will you call Lord Tigrevurmud like that... He's the Vanadis-sama's prisoner.”

Though Tigre was not particularly strong, he was able to win enough to return Rurick's money somehow as well as collect some for himself.

He had not heard anything new about Brune.

He heard information only once, though, of course, he was asleep.

“Sorry. Limlisha-sama told us not to speak of Brune in front of you.”

Since he was not a child, he decided to give up.

Besides, even if he asked, he would hear nothing.

When the sun set, the men gathered in the training ground to play.

Though there were public baths, the allotted time was determined. The firewood needed to be carried and the water boiled. Tigre often used it as well.

After that, he returned to the dining room for dinner, ate his meal, and returned to his room.

In such a way, Tigre seemed to have adapted to his prisoner's life.

Although he had adapted to his lifestyle, Tigre could not say he was entirely enjoying it.

Deep in his mind, he was always questioning the situation.

He had two choices if he wished to return to Alsace.

Either pay the ransom or escape.

His means of escape had been sealed.

In addition, though his archery skills was superior, it was impossible for him to break away from Rurick and defeat the soldiers, especially if he could not prepare the required number of arrows. If Ellen came out, it would be impossible for him to win.

“Money, is it...”

---

In his room, while sitting on the bed, he toyed with the dozen copper pieces in his hand. The amount was hardly enough for a ransom.

He had even contacted Ellen.

“Is there any job where I might earn some money?”

“Will you become my subordinate? Or perhaps you could work in a Muozinel galley ship. If you simply rowed for a year, I could consider introducing you to the job. Even if you die, the amount you earn will be deducted from the ransom and returned to your family.”

“... So if I don't become your subordinate, I'll have to work to death.”

“You can't remain a prisoner of war for very long, right? It's still not too late.”

Since he could not think of anything good, Tigre could only surrender to Ellen.

*... It is possible Teita and Batran or Massas can prepare the ransom.*

Still... it was unpleasant that it was necessary to rely on them.

It was not that he distrusted Teita and the others.

He just did not want them to perform so much unreasonable work to prepare the ransom in such a short amount of time.

*--- I have no choice but to escape, but it will be difficult.*

Though he took a stroll every day, the guards defended all the vital areas.

In addition, he did not understand the security near the ramparts, since he was never allowed near them.

Also, there was more than one wall.

Even if he could escape from the Imperial Palace, it was impossible to pass the wall encompassing the castle.

After that, he would reach the city.

*--- I will have only one chance, so I'll investigate it properly.*

Until the ransom date, there was still time. Tigre persuaded himself as such.

“Tigre, can you use anything other than a bow?”

One day, Tigre was called to the office and asked by Ellen without any explanation.

“I am poor with other arms.”

“Is that so? It's not good, even if you hide it.”

Ellen looked at Tigre, as if doubting him. Rather than making fun of him, she doubted him.

“I have no reason to lie about such a thing. If I could use a sword or spear, I would have picked up a weapon at Dinant when my arrows were exhausted. I could have ambushed you.”

---

Tigre shrugged his shoulder. If he had experience with the sword or spear, he would never have been made a fool of in his country.

“Don’t sulk. Your bow technique made such an impact on the people here. Even Rurick is attached to you. I’m quite surprised.”

“That...”

Tigre played with his hair, slightly embarrassed.

“Was there any point doing that to his hair?”

“He needed to be punished. Rurick gladly shaved his head.”

“Gladly?”

“There are two reasons. The first is because you spared his life, so he was moved deeply. The second is because he admires your bow arm, since Rurick is the one who most excels in archery here.”

Because Rurick was skilled with the bow, he understood how difficult it would be to aim at an enemy with such an inferior weapon.

---

Yet Tigre managed to accomplish it without difficulty.

Rurick experienced such a shock that he completely shaved his head and ignored the fact that Tigre was a prisoner of war.

“His popularity with women seems to have taken a dive, but he doesn't seem to mind it.”

“Ah, well, I suppose that's fine.”

Tigre agreed in an impolite manner, though he could not declare it was nothing.

“He also willingly accepted being your watchdog. Actually, he asked to do so.”

Tigre tilted his neck. He misunderstood things because of Rurick's tone and attitude.

Though he was the one watching over Tigre, the role originally left a gloomy image.

It was annoying to do excessive work.

“Everyone is interested in you. Of course, that includes me.”

---

Ellen smiled involuntarily at him.

“I want to know what you have. It's possible you have some unexpected talents. I'll try a few things with you tomorrow.”

Since he was a captive, it was impossible to refuse.

And so, the next day came.

In the training area, only three people, Tigre, Ellen, and Lim, were present.

Before Tigre, Ellen held a spear in a simple posture.

Tigre confronted her as well, a spear grasped in both hands. Of course, since they were practicing, the tips were removed.

Lim silently watched the two from a distance.

Beside her was a javelin, a battleaxe, a large hatchet, a club, a scythe, a chain, an arbalest, and many other weapons.

“... What should I do?”

---

“Do as you like.”

Ellen smiled at Tigre, who was at a loss for words.

For the time being, Tigre, as per the basics, thrust his spear at her. Ellen lightly parried it with her wrist.

Along with a dull sound, a heavy impact transmitted to his hand.

“Can't you do this a bit more aggressively?”

She provoked him by destroying his posture. Tigre, annoyed, attacked quickly.

Smashing from above, cleaving from the side, jabbing from the front.

However, Ellen received everything.

She had not used her sword.

Though Tigre was impressed, it was still mortifying.

--- However, he was poor with the spear and only knew the basics. He had only used a spear to kill a brown bear while hunting.

---

Suddenly, an idea flashed in Tigre's head.

Though it was called training, Ellen understood Tigre's ability based on his offense and defense. She had an attitude as if she had strength to spare.

*--- I'll do that once Ellen relaxes her guard...!*

“Uoo!”

Gripping the spear, Tigre rushed forward and shouted, thrusting the weapon at her.

Ellen smiled wryly and hit the weapon upward; however, Tigre did not stop his feet.

Though he staggered from the impact when the spear was parried, he rammed his shoulder into Ellen. Surprised, Ellen could not avoid it, and the two fell onto the ground.

“How... about that?”

He tried to pin Ellen and seemed to have failed.

Below him, Ellen's face showed surprise. Soon, it was dyed red as she looked intently up at Tigre.

---

After that, Tigre noticed a soft feeling beneath his right hand.

*... Impossible.*

When he moved his glance, his right hand had grabbed Ellen's chest.

"Ah, no, that's not, this..."

Though he was looking for an excuse, his words did not come out.

Lim, immediately afterward, ran up and struck Tigre's head with the sheathe of her sword.



Tigre crouched, holding his head in agony.

Ellen stood up, her clothes now dirty, with a complicated expression.

“Eleanora-sama, please, give me an order. I shall take this man's head.”

“It, it's fine. It's not such a big deal.”

Ellen tried to put on a good expression but failed. Her voice was shrill and her face was red. While brushing the dirt from her clothes, she strongly touched the place Tigre's hand grabbed.

“Pushing a Vanadis down, is that not enough for capital punishment?”

Lim looked down at Tigre, full of murderous intent.

“It was my mistake. I took it easy to test his strength. If you show your frustration any longer, it will be a mockery to our names.”

“... If Eleanora-sama says so.”

Lim put her weapon away reluctantly. Ellen held a hand out to Tigre and quickly spoke.

“Can you stand?”

“... Thank you.”

While rubbing the back of his aching head with his left hand, Tigre used his right hand to stand up.

“I think my head broke.”

“Bear with it. I did not hit you out of malice.”

“There was clearly a thirst for blood.”

“It could not be helped.”

After laughing lightly, Ellen muttered in a small voice only Tigre could hear.

“You touched a woman's chest. It might not always end so safely.”

Tigre looked down and averted his gaze, seeing Ellen's face straight on for a moment.

---

“All right, let's continue.”

Ellen finally regained her composure, and Tigre's returned as well.

“When it comes to you, I won't be let down at all. I suppose I'll attack mercilessly when testing you.”

Seeing the mountain of arms, Ellen gladly spoke with a nasty tone.

After finishing with all the weapons, Tigre lay spread out on the spot.

Sweat covered his body, and his breathing was rough. His chest moved up and down heavily, and his arms and legs felt a pain they were unaccustomed to, since he was mercilessly beaten.

“You really are useless if you are not using a bow.”

“That's... what I told you...”

Lim looked down at Tigre with cold eyes as he returned an exhausted reply.

---

“It was not like you were terrible. New recruits are like you. If you were my colleague or subordinate, I would train you from scratch.”

“You shouldn't tease him so much, Lim.”

Ellen pat Lim's shoulder while throwing out those words. The two were faintly sweating.

The two acted as Tigre's partners, taking turns. Neither Ellen nor Lim were as tired as Tigre.

“Still, his bow is excellent.”

Folding her arms, Ellen nodded her head joyfully.

Because she understood his capability with the bow, she had him do a successive discharge earlier.

To do this, he shot thirty arrows in quick succession trying to hit a target accurately. He fired quickly, pulled an arrow from his quiver, nocked the bowstring, and repeated his actions. The time was measured until he hit the target.

Tigre had achieved a result such that no one could match him.

---

“I shall put these away.”

Lim turned her back on Ellen and Tigre, weapons in hand.

“Shall we help?”

“... It is fine.”

He proposed that while lying down and was quickly turned down.

Seeing Lim's back, Ellen's shoulders were shaking as she held back a laugh. She smiled bitterly as she turned to Tigre.

“Don't feel so bad. She was pretty much saying, 'Go to sleep and stop thinking about strange things.'”

“She didn't look any different from usual.”

“Lim is evaluating you in her own way. If you formally become my subordinate, she will show more respect.”

She was asking if he wanted to join without directly saying the words. Tigre let out a deep breath. Though he

---

was interested, it would be impossible, since he could not bring himself to truly work under her.

Ellen nodded slightly and held her skirt.

“I'll help Lim. You go rest in your room.”

“... Alone?”

Tigre was indirectly saying he might escape.

Rurick, who watched him, was not present. Before testing the weapons, Lim had told the others not to come.

Also, the day was nearing its end.

Within a half koku (one hour), the sky would become dark.

“I'm sure you remember the way. If you get lost, just ask a maid or a soldier.”

Ellen smiled as she walked away.

Tigre looked up at the red-tinted sky and sighed.

“... She got me.”

---

He knew he would never forgive himself.

He felt comfortable here. Of course, the best place would always be Alsace.

He was a captive. There was a limitation to where he could go, and he was attended to by a guard.

However, he had never suffered abuse or harassment. Both his room and clothes was cleaned as well.

Even when he slept until midday, no one said a word. Though Lim showed her disappointment, there were no complaints.

His meals were no different from the soldiers'.

By luck, he was able to have a baked butter apple dumpling, grilled trout, soup with pickles, beef, and potatoes, and a nice citrus juice.

The seasonings and fragrance of the trout and the moderate acidity, though hardly grand, was simple and filled Tigre with warmth.

The texture of the beef was exquisite, and the potato was well made.

---

“It really was delicious. I wonder if Teita can make it some day...”

Such thoughts came to him.

Above all, his archery skills were accepted here.

Lim disliked Tigre, though only with things “not dealing with the bow.”

He recalled Ellen's words.

She asked him to become her subordinate. She looked him in the eye.

She appraised him based on his abilities.

--- *For me, there is only the bow.*

He thought he should be in a place where he was accepted. That was hardly unnatural.

“Well, it can't be helped.”

Still, Teita and Alsace were important.

“Anyway, I'll be forced to wake up early if I become her subordinate.”

Lim would likely mercilessly wake him up. Also, there would be work, and it would be impossible for him to go hunting.

A wry smile rose to Tigre's face as he imagined it. Tigre stood up, his clothes drenched in sweat and sticking to his body. His body felt unpleasant.

*--- I'll go wash up.*

Tigre headed to the well near the training area. All the soldiers, when finished with training, headed there.

Though there was a bath for the soldiers, there were specified times they could use it, and, of course, they were required to carry and boil the water.

That is why the well was used more frequently.

In a place where the well came to view, Tigre stopped his feet.

---

Apparently, thirty soldiers had gathered around the well, having just finished training. There were more than ten people in line.

*--- Perhaps I'll look for a change of scenery.*

Without letting them find him, Tigre changed the direction he moved in.

When playing with the soldiers, he had to bet something. Not being well acquainted with the soldiers, he did not wish for them to lend him anything.

Naturally, there were still those who thought poorly of Tigre's presence.

Right now, that group was bathing. He wished to avoid unnecessary friction.

And so he left.

Tigre turned the corner of a building and entered an inconspicuous foot path.

Beyond this, another well existed. He found it one day while taking a walk.

---

A short tree grew thickly, blocking the view of the path.

While approaching the well, he heard the sound of water pouring.

“I wonder if someone else is here.”

Tigre reached the well while thinking so. Immediately, his breathing stopped, his eyes opened widely, and his body stiffened.

Ellen, without a single piece of clothing, was bathing. A rugged object the color of green rust lay at her feet.

“Hm? Ah, it's you.”

Ellen, without any sign of shyness, looked at the stunned Tigre. Ellen let out a small laugh without trying to conceal her body.

Tigre did not speak. He could not move a finger while he stared intently at Ellen's body. Her argent hair stuck to her fair skin, her breasts were accentuated by the water, the line of her soft, round buttocks and tight waist was sensational. Because of that, even her usual smile seemed amorous.

---

『……そんなに見つめられると、  
さすがに恥ずかしくなつてくるのだが』



Water ran down from the nape of her neck to the valley between her breasts.

“... Even I'll get embarrassed if you look at me so much.”

Ellen's voice was faintly dyed in shyness.

At last, Tigre returned to reality. He turned around in panic.

“I, I'm sorry. Although I heard someone, I, no...”

He spouted out words, attempting to find a proper excuse.

His face flushed, and his heart danced wildly.

Even if he panicked and shut his eyes tightly, her white body was firmly engraved in his mind.

*--- Just a while ago, I touched her there.*

He recalled the soft feeling in his right hand. It was too intense for Tigre in a variety of ways.

---

“You don't have to apologize. You came to bathe, right? There's no need to go back.”

Tigre did not understand.

“Um, is it normal for a man and a woman to bathe together in Zhcted?”

His mind was not operating normally, yet he somehow managed to squeeze words out.

“It would no longer be amusing if the two were older than 6 or 7 years old.”

She was clearly amused. She had not gotten angry, either. Tigre buried his head in his hands and stooped down on the ground.

“I told you before, it's a bit embarrassing, but as a Vanadis, as leader of LeitMeritz, I must speak and act as is appropriate to my position. Even if it was surprising to be seen naked, I can't speak or act like a little girl.”

“Ah, ah... I see.”

---

If Tigre was calmer, he may have noticed Ellen was washing up quite quickly. She had not spoken formally, either.

“Are you here with your guard? Or are you alone?”

“I’m alone now. If she stuck around me all day, it would be stifling. Besides, I was looking to take a bath anyway.”

“Aren’t you too defenseless? You were attacked by an assassin the other day.”

Though she had spoken of the assassin, Tigre had not seen the assailant himself.

“I’m not defenseless. My sword is nearby.”

When she said that, he recalled the longsword propped up against the well. Still, he was anxious.

Suddenly, Ellen spoke up.

“By chance, did you come here not knowing this well was for women only?”

---

“Is that... so?”

“I often use it since it's near my room and office and the soldiers always kept their distance. Once Lim and the maids learned of it, they began using it. It became women-only before I was aware. Maybe I should have told you this.”

“Really, I'm sorry. I'll be careful next time.”

“Yeah, that's good. It's fine if it's just me, but if it's Lim or someone else, they would scream. Even I cannot protect you then.”

He could not imagine the expressionless Lim screaming.

Again, he heard the sound of water.

“Are you not coming?”

“When you are finished.”

Though he thought she was teasing him, her voice sounded natural. It was hard for him not to answer curtly.

---

“I got it. Wait a bit.”

The sound of water continued as Tigre looked up at the dim sky.

If he turned around, Ellen would be there naked. He could not settle down. The sound of water was clearly audible.

--- *I should have left immediately after apologizing.*

Since she said to wait a little, he felt it difficult to move

The sound of rustling came from behind as something approached his feet. It was a young Dragon with a stocky body, its length about four chet (approximately forty centimeters).

“Dragon...?”

It was a living creature with wings similar to a bat, fluttering at an angle. Two horns grew from its head. Covering most of its body were rugged blue-green scales.

The Dragon reared its head and looked at Tigre with sharp eyes.

---

“This is my Dragon, Lunie.”

He heard Ellen's voice from behind. Incidentally, this creature was near her feet a while ago.

The Dragon named Lunie narrowed its eyes and rubbed against Tigre's leg.

“You're quite unusual.”

Dragons were said to have high intelligence. Even at a young age, they could accurately identify a human face.

This was the first time Tigre had seen such a young Dragon. He quietly bent his waist to get a better look. Lunie stopped moving and watched Tigre quietly; the wings on its back lightly shook.

--- *Its wings are moving firmly. Perhaps it's a Wyvern.*<sup>Vyfal</sup>

“Is this your first time seeing a Dragon?”

“No. Two years ago, I saw one when hunting in the mountains. It was in an isolated area, about sixty or seventy chet (approximately six or seven meters), though it was an Earth Dragon.”<sup>Suro</sup>

---

An adult Dragon ranges from one hundred to one-hundred-fifty chet. Though man can keep them while they are young until about half their adult size, it was still more than fifty chet.

“You've got good luck. I've never seen a Dragon other than Lunie up until now.”

“This Dragon has two eyes.”

As he reached a hand out to stroke Lunie, it ran from Tigre and returned to its master. Ellen smiled at the Dragon and lifted it in her arms, as if soothing a child.

“An Earth Dragon with one eye? What happened?”

“It attacked me. After fighting it off, I somehow managed to escape. I thought I would die then.”

A Dragon's combat efficiency was different from other animals.

The large Dragon stamped the earth and mowed down trees. Tigre kept an eye on it while evading death many times. He somehow managed to defeat it using the terrain.

---

“Fighting against a Dragon and winning is wonderful. By the way, what color were its scales?”

“It was a brass color. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Ah, that's good. In this country, it is not permissible to kill young or Black Dragons.”

Tigre imagined the flag in his head upon hearing those words.

Dragons were in the mythology of many countries. Dragons inhabited remote areas, even in Zhcted. Of the Dragons in Zhcted, the Black Dragon was a mythical creature.

The Dragon with black scales granted protection to the person closest to it. It was a well known story.

“My country does not have such things. Are there Dragon trainers in Zhcted?”

“I don't know about individuals, but Dragons are not kept as a part of the army, since they're big eaters.”

---

The latter half of her words were likely directed toward Lunie.

“Still, you were not accepted, even though you defeated a Dragon?”

“I couldn't show them the corpse. It was impossible to cut off any part of it, and I was tired. I thought to come back, but when I returned, a mudslide had covered it up.”

“How disappointing.”

“No, it's fine.”

Silence followed. Only the sound of water could be heard.

“... May I ask you one thing?”

While looking up to the sky, Tigre anxiously asked a vague question.

“Since there are assassins, can't you depend on His Majesty?”

“Yes?”

Seeing his doubtful reaction, she muttered in confusion.

“Unfortunately, His Majesty will not move if there is no evidence. Since the enemy knows this, they come with the resolution to be crushed.”

“... It's a serious situation, isn't it?”

Tigre had a complex face. The King of Zhcted, the King of Brune, both just ignored things.

“Let me ask you something.”

While Tigre bitterly thought about reality, Ellen asked a question.

“What kind of place is Alsace?”

“Are you worried?”

“A bit. Though I gave you some good conditions, you rejected me without hesitation, so I was a little hurt. I'm a bit interested.”

---

“I also thought the conditions were good.”

After he replied, Tigre loosened his mouth.

“Simply put, it is a country made of forests and mountains. The main highways do not pass by. To reach the capital, I must head to the neighboring territory to reach a good road. It can take many days.”

“You speak of it fondly.”

It was the important town he was born and raised in.

Even if he spoke of its faults, he was still proud of it.

“There are wolves and brown bears in the forests and mountains. Occasionally, snow leopards appear. There are many nuts and wild herbs to be found, and you can manage to live through the winter with little food if you have a bit of knowledge. The people under my charge are nice, and it is peaceful. Though the winters can be severe, sleeping while wrapped in blankets before the fireplace is the greatest feeling. On the contrary, summers are cool, and there are many fine, sunny days. Atop the hills is an ocean of green, as far as the eye can see, and when the wind comes out, you can relax and bask in the sun.”

---

“You just like sleeping.”

Ellen smiled bitterly.

“Do you... not yearn to become King?”

“It's not like this is particularly a good reason, but that dream is a bit too much.”

He could handle being mocked as a country person because it was a fact.

However, there were no memories he wished to forget.

“I had heard the bow was scorned, but I did not think it would be so exaggerated.”

In Alsace, Teita included, there was not a single person who had to take practice swings.

That was why everyone believed in Tigre.

“It's more than you can imagine. In all military literature, the tone changes completely when dealing with the bow. In Alsace, even aristocrats and Knights who had valorous deeds were clearly scorned. Even the women and their daughters ridiculed them for being

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cowardly. Though it has its value, the bow is always ignored.”

No darkness could be heard in Tigre's voice as he spoke.

“Your father taught you the bow well, given the situation.”

“Though I don't remember, it seems I often played with a bow before I was of an age to think about it. Father saw that and encouraged me to continue if I was interested. Well, all my ancestors were hunters.”

“Then I suppose I should express my gratitude to your father. After all, I met you – Then again, I would not have been pushed down or seen naked.”

She spoke her last words with an ill-natured tone and growled at Tigre instinctively.

“I'm finished. You can turn around now.”

Looking back, Ellen stood before him, having changed into a short robe, her longsword at her waist. A thick cloth wrapped about her long, argent hair. Her white hands and feet popping out of her short robe presented a

---

slightly amorous appearance. Since he could not look straight at her, Tigre stared at Lunie, crouched by her feet

“It was an interesting conversation. See you around.”

The young Dragon followed after Ellen and disappeared into the road covered by the trees. Tigre sighed as he decided to quickly clean himself.

After his clothes were taken off and thrown aside, he headed to the tub and poured water over his body many times to forget the sight from a moment ago.

That is why he was late in noticing the approaching footsteps.

“Eleanora-sa...?”

On the other side of the tree, Lim appeared wearing a short robe while holding a tub.

Lim, at a loss for words, saw Tigre's figure before she could finish responding.

Usually, her face lacked emotion, but she was clearly stunned now.

---

Tigre, too, was petrified. The lower half of his body was quite shameful to look at, having seen Ellen just before.

“Ah--...”

After a few seconds of silence, Tigre uttered a noise, though he was still confused.

He intended to find suitable words while looking for a means of escape.

“Behavior befitting my position...”

He thought of his earlier conversation with Ellen.

“You do not need to worry about me.”

Though he tried to conceal his embarrassment with dignified words, the tub was thrown at him along with a scream.

---

“Ho, so you saw him.”

Ellen returned Lunie to the stable where the young Dragons were held and returned to her office. Her chest was shaking, ready to burst, as she heard Lim's story.

Her silver-white hair shined with moisture, just having finished her bath.

“I haven't seen it yet. What was he like?”

“No comment.”

Her indignant complexion accompanied the rage in her blue eyes. Lim let out a heated breath.

“You must restrict his movements more.”

“Even though he's become adapted here? He's on good terms with the soldiers and the cooking staff.”

“Has there ever been a captive accustomed to such a life?”

---

“I’m still waiting for him to ask to be my subordinate, after all.”

Lim sighed.

“There are also those amongst the soldiers who dislike his behavior.”

Lim implied there might be a conflict between those who like Tigre and those who do not.

“Would confining Tigre to his room really solve everything?”

“Sooner or later, he will return to his home in Brune if the ransom is paid, or he will be sold to a merchant from Muozinel.”

“That’s why I gave him the choice to become my subordinate.”

Ellen took a document from the pile on her desk and showed it to Lim. Lim’s eyes looked dubious as she read it, but soon her anger disappeared.

“... Brune seems to be in a terrible situation.”

---

“I was surprised as well. Only a month has passed since the incident at Dinant, and already the situation is like this.”

The document was a summary of the situation from a person of Zhcted living in Brune as something of an ambassador. The person disguised himself and traveled about Brune as a peddler, exploring the situation on his own, and reporting back periodically.

It could be explained in a single phrase.

[There are signs of a civil war in Brune.]

[The King who lost his son, the Prince, is simply an empty shell. He has given up political affairs and has shut himself in his room. He is not stopping the behavior of the stronger aristocrats.]

“It seems Thenardier and Ganelon are the two largest aristocrats. Every day seems to be a violent conflict between the two.”

Ellen did not speak as if it were another person's affair.

LeitMeritz was the territory adjacent to Brune Kingdom.

---

If Brune became entrenched in war, there was a possibility her land would be involved.

“They can't possibly afford to concern themselves with Tigre's situation. Alsace is alone here. They will not be able to prepare a ransom.”

“By the way, why was the sum so large?”

“His bow.”

Tapping her desk, Ellen sighed.

“When holding an excellent swordsman captive, don't you increase the ransom based on his skill? Though the countries reviewed the agreement regarding the ransom amounts, they set a severe amount for archers. To Brune, that was a trivial issue.”

When Lim heard Ellen's words, her pale face turned expressionless.

“Though I can lower the amount, I don't want to create a precedent out of sympathy. I don't have any reason to disregard the treaty, either.”

---

“... Then Lord Tigrevurmud cannot pay the ransom.”

“Though I intended to use Muozinel as a threat, it might come true at this rate.”

“So that's why you want him to become your subordinate?”

“It would be regrettable given his archery skills. His personality isn't an issue, either. If I taught him properly, he could become a good aide, he only needs a bit more work.”

Ellen laughed.

“I will offer my hand once more on the final day. He's rejected me once, it wouldn't do for my honor if I was rejected twice.”

Lim pulled herself together and asked a question.

“However, will it really not be paid? Either Ganelon or Thenardier might take advantage of the situation and pay the ransom for Lord Tigrevurmud. One could show he is not a man who would abandon a small aristocrat to the land of deserts.”

---

“As far as I can tell, Tigre would prefer not to serve under Ganelon or Thenardier. It wouldn't benefit him at all. Do you know how severe the treatment would be under either of them? They are genuine Brune aristocrats who scorn the bow.”

Ellen had a difficult expression remembering her conversation with Tigre.

“Either way, tell the soldiers I will hear any complaints they have.”

“Ho, Earl Vorn...”

The aristocrat who heard Massas' story had a pitiful expression.

“We lost more soldiers in Dinant than we have in recent years. The damage was severe, and many nobles died.”

---

“Yes. However, though captive, Lord Tigrevurmud is alive. As a friend of his deceased father, I wish to save him.”

Massas was in the mansion of an aristocrat acquaintance.

He had a prosperous life. In the drawing room Massas passed by, there was an expensive tapestry made in Muozinel with an image of a bird with gold wings decorating the wall. On the chair was the fur of a snow leopard. Expensive wine was poured into a crystal cup and served to Massas.

*--- This is the fifth person. If this does not work, I have no one else to rely on.*

If he could not depend on others, he would not make it by the deadline.

While praying to the Gods in his heart, Massas bowed before the noble before him.

“Please. I will return the money, no matter how long it might take. Will you help me?”

Only silence remained.

---

“I’m sorry.”

Though the aristocrat threw a sympathetic glance at Massas, he quietly spoke the word to break the silence.

Massas desperately clenched his fist, holding back the tears he wished to shed, despite his age.

“Before Dinant, I would have answered your request, Lord Massas. However, given the recent developments...”

The aristocrat continued to speak with a heavy tone.

“--- A civil war will soon take place in this country.”

“... Between Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier.”

Massas responded without power in either his face or his voice.

He had heard the story recently.

Due to the shock of Prince Regnas' death, the affairs of the state were thrown aside. He had confined himself in his mind.

---

The man was a well known aristocrat who could indulge in such a fine life.

Ganelon and Thenardier were distant cousins to the King, and their confrontation deepened day by day. Apart from them, there were many other nobles who, given the circumstances, needed to act with discretion. Any mistake could make the situation worse and could even destroy a house.

However, they might have some spare gold, information, or associations with other aristocrats. Since it was an emergency, even if they had much gold, they were unwilling to use it.

Though he was a close friend, they would not lend him the money.

Massas left with heavy steps.

“... So it was useless.”

The sun had sunk and the sky was a dark gray. With how the clouds looked, it would soon rain.

Massas could not blame them, since Massas did not have the money to help Tigre, either.

---

Many people worked in his residence, and it was necessary to maintain his soldiers and territory. There was a limit to what he could do.

--- *Tigre, sorry... Teita, Batran, I'm sorry... Forgive me...*

Massas silently returned to the house as the rain descended.

## The Vanadis' Castle

On the mountain north of Zhcted, the snow was present all year round. The sea, Muozinel, and Brune bordered to the east, south, and west respectively.

The country had a cold climate with longer winters than other countries. It was occasionally referred to as the [Land of Snow and Forests] due to its scattered coniferous forests. They could produce potatoes and apples, catch fish from the sea, and there was an abundance of gold and silver mines in the center of the kingdom.

It was made approximately three hundred years ago.

At the time, there were more than fifty tribes fighting to control a hegemony.

The war lasted more than a century. At least thirty tribes were destroyed or absorbed into other tribes in the process. Then one man casually appeared on the land.

“I am the incarnation of the Black Dragon.”

The man referred to himself as such. So long as he was King, he would bring victory.

---

Though most tribes mocked him, seven tribes believed his words and followed his lead.

As proof of their loyalty, the seven tribes each presented a beautiful woman who excelled in martial skills as a wife. To those seven wives, he granted them a <sup>Viralt</sup> weapon called a [Dragonic Tool].

“You, from this moment on, will be [Vanadis].”

Afterward, the seven tribes led by the man suppressed the other clans and won the war.

The man continued to fight, even after unifying the tribes, conquering neighboring countries and significantly expanding his territory.

And so, the Kingdom of Zhcted was established.

The man made King had seven Dukedoms within his country. The ability to collect taxes and various autonomous privileges were granted to each of his wives. No matter what distinguished services a person received, the only one ranked above the Vanadis would be the King.

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The King made a declaration before the Vanadis.

“The Vanadis will offer fealty to the King, protect the King, and fight for the King. Do not forget it.”

The candle near the King's throne cast a dark shadow across the floor.

The shadow did not conform to a human shape but was that of a Dragon.

“... Though it's a myth, I don't really get the point of it.”

Those were Tigre's first words upon reading the history of Zhcted.

He was on the roof of the Imperial Palace.

The sky was clear, and the day was warm.

---

Tigre had borrowed a book from the library and sat cross-legged on the slanted rooftop as he read.

The reason he was on the roof was simple. The library was dim, the weather was good, and, if he looked down, he could see the courtyard decorated with tall trees and flower beds.

The Imperial Palace was enclosed by a rampart and tower. Though he could not see beyond that, the sky continued on, sending a cool breeze to his seat.

If he had not slept enough, Tigre would certainly take a nap.

“This is the easiest history book to read...”

With his face looking like he had taken medicine, Tigre opened the book on his knee.

Tigre was not familiar with Zhcted writing, so it was more difficult for him to read than he imagined.

Furthermore, it used old words and terminology. Since there were many expressions as well, it was difficult for him to read anything. More than half the book was unreadable.

---

Rurick, who was still monitoring him, stood in the hallway below the roof Tigre sat on. When he asked for help, the following words came to him.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, I am more than willing to help you; however, I cannot understand such difficult language, either.”

Though he had trouble reading, he was still an Earl. He had been given an education to match his status, so he was better than most.

“I'm sorry.”

“No, don't worry about it. It was not unreasonable.”

He was a soldier, not a scholar.

“Do you know anyone who can read things like this?”

“I do not.”

Rurick gave a difficult expression.

“Though it is difficult to say, I do not believe anyone could read better than you, Lord Tigrevurmud. Perhaps you should try asking Vanadis-sama or Limlisha-sama.”

---

“I wonder if they would help...”

He considered it, half to kill time, and half out of hesitation.

However, there was something worrying he wanted to hear from Ellen.

When he folded his arms, a small shadow flew to the roof. It was the young Dragon, Lunie.

Though Tigre reached out to the Dragon with a smile, it did not seem interested once it climbed to the roof. Lunie began basking its round body in a sunny place.

--- *This Dragon is quite like a cat.*

Not wanting to disturb it, Tigre stood up.

When he casually looked at the view before him, he noticed Ellen at the edge of his sight.

She moved quickly between the trees, as if trying to avoid being noticed. She approached the rampart, not noticing his gaze most likely.

---

“Rurick, I'm going to see what Ellen says. I'll return to my room right after I talk to her.”

“Very well.”

After hearing Rurick walk down the passage, Tigre held the history book beneath his arm and jumped off the roof.

Grabbing the branch of a tree directly below him, he softened his fall and used the recoil to hit the ground.

When he stood up again, the gardener taking care of the flower bed looked at Tigre, her face full of surprise.

With a bitter smile, Tigre left the courtyard at a trot. Moving between the trees, he caught sight of Ellen.

“What are you doing?”

When he called, Ellen's shoulders shook in surprise as she looked back.

“Wha, wha, wha, what are you doing here...!?”

Blushing, Ellen glared at him, her face red with surprise. It was the first time he had heard her stutter.

---

Her appearance was different. Her long, silver-white hair was braided and tied near the nape of her neck. Her hemp dress gave a clean appearance.

Her sword was sheathed at her waist, inconspicuously covered in cloth. She looked like any girl on the street, though it was unlikely any girl would be so beautiful.

“I wanted to ask you something, and I saw you.”

Though he was curious about her attitude and attire, Tigre responded honestly.

“You saw?”

Ellen looked at him suspiciously, thinking it impossible that she could have been seen. She gripped Tigre's arm and pulled him toward the rampart.

“Can't be helped. You come, too.”

“Where?”

“Outside.”

Outside the rampart, the two descended a gentle slope.

---

The castle town was about a half belsta (approximately five hundred meters) away.

The streets were lined with stone houses with black or brown roofs.

The street was wide enough to comfortably allow a large wagon, and it was neatly paved with cobblestone.

Travelers, citizens, merchants, officials, artisans, many walked along the stalls at the edges of the streets.

Many housewives were chatting, the merchants called out. A minstrel played a harp at an intersection.

“It's much busier than Nice.”

Unlike Nice, the capital of Brune, which he had visited only once or twice, it made Tigre smile broadly. The dialect of Zhcted and the movement of copper and silver coins was a common sight.

Tigre was impressed by the unglazed pottery and glass-work of various shapes and sizes.

---

Fresh, bright fruit overflowed from wooden crates, slabs of meat were hung from hooks, and the fragrance of potatoes made him swallow his saliva.

Suddenly, girls his age passed by, laughing as they noticed Tigre.

“Does he really want things like that so much?”

“Maybe she wants something, too.”

In response, Ellen extended a finger to Tigre's hair.

“So they wear these kinds of things outside the walls?”

In Ellen's hand, who was laughed at and ridiculed, there was a leaf.

Due to its lightness, Tigre had not noticed at all. He gave his thanks.

“Where did you get this? Did you stick your head in some bushes?”

Tigre finally explained how he found her.

There was only silence until Ellen entered the castle town. It was not an atmosphere he could ask questions.

“What are you, a monkey?”

Ellen spoke coldly as she looked at him in amazement. Tigre was hurt.

“Really, the roof? Should I take that into consideration. ..? No, you're probably the only one who would do those kinds of things...”

“I'd like to ask a few questions sometime, if that's fine with you.”

While Ellen was looking down deep in thought, Tigre called out hesitantly.

“Why were you trying to sneak out of your castle like that?”

Ellen looked dubiously, not understanding Tigre's intent in asking the question.

“Shouldn't that be obvious?”

This time, it was Tigre's turn to tilt his head.

---

In front of the potato stand, the two people looked at each other mysteriously. The salesman coughed.

Tigre left after purchasing two potatoes. He used money he won while betting with the soldiers.

As they ate their potatoes, they walked along, looking at the unglazed pottery. The heat made the potato seem to melt.

The sweet fragrance of butter mixed with the rising steam, stimulating Tigre's appetite.

He entered the square with Ellen, and they sat side-by-side at the edge of a flower bed.

Using small bites to eat her potato, Ellen smiled, savoring her meal.

“I chose good ones. Praise me.”

Tigre was surprised by her theatrical tone and dramatic smile.

“... Can you really tell between the good and bad ones?”

---

Tigre asked with a burnt tongue as he enjoyed the texture of the potato.

“There were plenty of bad ones. Small potatoes, ones that don't steam enough, ones that are too cool, there are plenty of things that could be lacking... This degree of melting is just right. I'm impressed with the amount of salt used, too.”

“You must like them.”

Ellen smiled broadly before looking away into the distance.

The subject of her gaze was a group of children gathering around a puppeteer.

“The winters of Zhcted are so cold; sometimes there are reports of people freezing to death. The cold air slips through the thick stone walls in the evening and steals them away without mercy. Children often gather around the hearth, wrap up in blankets, and eat hot potatoes to live through it all.”

Tigre imagined a warm, pleasant sight.

Tigre looked at Ellen's profile with wonder in his eyes.

---

Her expression was as if she missed her distant past. He felt uncomfortable.

--- *She speaks as if she grew up in a small village.*

It would be too simple to think she was a girl raised in the art of war as a duchess.

--- *Perhaps I'm wrong? Still, it's not like I can just ask.*

For a time, the two silently ate their potatoes. Tigre spoke up as he finished eating.

“... Is it possible you came to inspect the area surrounding the castle?”

“You noticed?”

Ellen now looked at Tigre's face.

“Have you never left your castle incognito?”

“I left normally, there was no need to be stealthy.”

“I'm jealous.”

---

Ellen sighed with a face that showed the emotion at the bottom of her heart.

“It is one of my few pleasures to pretend to be a normal girl having fun. It lets me stroll around the town.”

In Ellen's life, being attacked by an assassin was not uncommon.

When walking through town, she required a large escort.

“So why did you panic so much when I called out to you like that?”

“You surprised me, really.”

“... Sorry.”

Tigre apologized sincerely.

Ellen forcibly dragged Tigre along to avoid having her behavior exposed, probably to Lim.

*She must also want to spend some time alone.*

---

“We'll call it even with this. Don't worry.”

Laughing, Ellen threw the unglazed clay bowl to the ground as she finished eating her potato.

“Is it fine to throw it on the roadside?”

In Nice, the capital of Brune, it was considered a disgraceful act, so Tigre asked tentatively.

“Whether it's on the stone pavement or the ground, it doesn't matter. There are those who collect such things and earn small change.”

“Ah, that's true, I guess. If it's broken, they can mix it in with new clay.”

While responding to Ellen's words, Tigre's bowl, now empty, was also thrown away.

“Tigre, you had business with me? Does it have to do with that book you've been carefully holding?”

“I wanted to ask you a few things, but it's fine to wait until next time.”

As he nodded, Ellen extended her hand to Tigre.

---

“Then stay with me until I'm satisfied. It's unexpectedly refreshing to walk with another person.”

Tigre and Ellen looked around various places in the town

.

As someone who rarely left Alsace, everything was novel to him. There was a vibrancy in the town, it seemed to have everything.

“This is?”

“It's a rye-based alcohol. Since it's not strong, children often drink it. Do you want a try?”

After a cup was poured for him, Tigre drank it in one go while looking at another stall.

“That is?”

“Steamed mushroom and potatoes. It looks like there are also pickles.”

The pan-roasted pickles gave a savory sensation to his mouth and stomach.

“And this?”

“It's a stir fry.”

He looked at a fried dish.

“This.”

“That's apple jam on honeyed bread... Why are you only interested in food?”

Ellen was amazed to see Tigre gnaw at the bread. Tigre continued to repeat his cycle of questioning and eating.

“They're all delicious. I've never had them before.”

“Well, it's your money, so I guess you can do what you want.”

Though she said that to Tigre, Ellen ate the same things. Rather than dividing between the two, they each got one.

“Well, I guess I am eating a lot.”

“Long ago, there was a potato eating contest in the castle. I ate thirty potatoes with butter, about the same size as the ones before.”

Ellen spoke with pride while Tigre continued bringing bread to his mouth.

It was difficult to imagine with her small mouth and body devoid of excess meat.

“... When food disappears from the kitchen, you must be the first they suspect.”

“I stole some food once before, but when they found out, they bowed respectfully, since Eleanora-sama was the one who was proudly and stealthily eating their food.”

She stopped. Tigre looked mortified.

“They're good people. If I have more than a nibble here or there, they might get angry.”

“It's fine eating alone in the kitchen. That's preferable, I think.”

---

*--- I have only a maid by my side, though she is younger.*

Ellen, looking proud until now, began speaking again.

“I'll tell you this now, but I wasn't always eating.”

Ellen stressed her words as she shook a skewer with fried food on it.

“Meals at the Imperial Palace are normally moderate. Because the townspeople do not come to the castle that frequently, we must bring out a novel dish when they do visit. It's a little difficult, but it's best to learn about their lives in detail.”

“You aren't particularly convincing with jam around your mouth.”

Tigre took out a handkerchief and wiped Ellen's mouth.

Ellen's eyes opened widely in surprise. She averted her face, now dyed red, in a panic.

“What's wrong?”

“No, no, it's nothing... Really, I let myself go whenever I'm here.”

While muttering softly, Ellen shook her head strongly, ruffling the feather ornament in her hair.

“Ah, you've got jam on your mouth, too.”

Her bright red Irises were laughing. Ellen extended her thin, white fingers.

She wiped the jam at the edge of Tigre's mouth and brought it to her own.

Seeing such a lovely and embarrassing gesture, Tigre turned his face away shyly.

“All right, let's go there next.”

Ignoring Tigre's reaction, Ellen pointed to a stall a small distance away with a cheerful voice.

The aim was to shoot Knight dolls over with a cork-shooting toy crossbow. Depending on the dolls knocked over, different prizes could be won.

---



The size and pose of the Knights differed. The dolls for expensive looking prizes would not fall easily.

“Which should I knock down?”

Though a toy, a crossbow was a crossbow, so of course he would be able to use it.

Due to the mechanics of a crossbow, he was not fond of using it, but Tigre was unexpectedly enthusiastic to play.

“Hm, how about those two.”

One of Ellen's targets was a conspicuously large doll by a large figure which would not fall over so easily. It had large feet and a low center of gravity, giving it a large amount of stability.

“Two, hm.”

“You can take up to four shots. Will you manage?”

While passing a copper coin to the man sitting at the stand, Ellen asked him naturally.

---

“Well, I'll give it a try.”

Tigre received the toy crossbow.

The first shot struck it easily.

It hit the head of the doll, bounced over the curtain, and landed in the back of the stall. Since he was looking for the trajectory, he did not particularly mind.

Tigre aimed at the smaller of the two dolls Ellen specified.

Despite a direct hit to the head, the cork bullet was light. The doll shook, but did not fall.

“Mu, too bad.”

Ellen spoke with regret, bringing her hand to her mouth.

--- *Did you really not notice?*

Tigre looked at Ellen, his eyes filled with doubt for a moment. Ellen looked back at him suspiciously. He shook his head as if it was nothing and returned his gaze to the dolls.

---

--- *She really didn't notice, though I suppose that's trivial. It's fine.*

Saying those words in his mind, Tigre thought about what to do with his third shot.

From how the doll shook, Tigre knew there was a support behind the doll.

Though it would not be a problem to knock them down, it was what might happen afterward that could be an issue.

He shot the third cork. It passed between both feet of his targeted doll. It rebound off the stand wall and hit the doll.

The doll, pushed from behind, pitched forward easily and fell from the stand.

“Oh! Nice!”

Ellen looked like a happy child as the stall owner picked up the doll, clicking his tongue in annoyance. He glared at Tigre.

“That shot is invalid, since it hit from behind.”

---

Tigre ignored the man's words and took his fourth shot.

It flew at the second doll and hit it from the side. The doll shook and fell down.

The man gazed at the doll in surprise.

When Tigre tapped the man's shoulder with a refreshing smile, he whispered to him.

"It's only these two. Are you sure you won't let me off here?"

"... What do you mean?"

"Will you let me have these? I wouldn't want to make a fuss about you cheating. I can just pretend not to know and you can run your shop quietly, if you know what I mean."

"... Please, tell me one thing."

While in a cold sweat, the man looked at Tigre uncomfortably.

---

“With only one or two shots, how did you understand ?”

“Humans do these things, no matter the time or place. When I was younger, I had to deal with many similar tricks.”

Tigre shrugged his shoulders, and the man laughed.

The deal was struck.

The prizes were a large stuffed bear, about the size of a small child, and a purple decorated ribbon.

“It was pretty cheap, and the prizes are pretty good.”

Tigre spoke in admiration, The man laughed loudly.

“If you don't set up good prizes, the visitors will stop coming.”

--- Indeed. Because there were good prizes, they did not pass the stall up. Tigre put the large bear in a sack and threw his history book into it. Ellen took the ribbon and put it in her hair.

---

“How is it? Does it suit me?”

Tigre was at a loss for words momentarily. Her flowing, silver-white hair and the purple ribbon matched perfectly. He did not think any other combination would work better.

“Yes, how beautiful.”

He obediently responded. He was mortified he could only use ordinary words.

“Is, is that so? That was unexpected.”

Ellen touched the ribbon quietly, her face dyed red.

“I, I've never had that much interest in these things. Since I always came alone, I never had anyone to show these things to. Yeah, it's good to come with someone occasionally.”

She spoke rapidly like a child to cover her embarrassment. Tigre felt it was adorable.

“Still, the stuffed animal is certainly an unexpected hobby.”

---

“Ah, that's for Lim, not for me.”

Surprising words came back to him.

“...Eh?”

“She'll yell at us when we get back. She'll be in a better mood if we give that to her.”

“With this?”

“It'll work. I brought her a stuffed animal before and her face lit up, bright red. I'm sure you'll see it soon as well.”

Tigre could not imagine it at all.

The two walked to another street while avoiding the crowd.

Ellen stopped in front of a certain bar.

“This shop serves good meals. I'm not sure if it's empty or not, so wait a moment.”

Tigre waited in place while Ellen pushed the door open.

---

A dirty lamp hung from the ceiling, bathing the interior in a dim light. The little tables were filled with people from Zhcted. Nearly thirty guests were cheerfully talking, burying the shop in noise.

Ellen looked inside the store and found a small, empty table. It would not be a problem with just her and Tigre.

Though Ellen tried to go out to call Tigre, her legs stopped moving. The voices of some customers reached her ear.

“How is Brune?”

“It's hardly good, since a civil war may start soon.”

The man shook his head as if it were absurd. Given their appearance, the two were merchants.

“Lords Thenardier and Ganelon did their own things, ignoring the King before, and now it has gotten worse. Any village acting against them is burned and the towns are thrown into ruin. It's only a rumor, but it seems aristocrats who show loyalty are granted Knighthood or a government office.”

“So that's the reason you came back.”

---

“Yeah. I'd rather not get involved, so I'll be staying for a while.”

Ellen left the shop silently and smiled to Tigre while shrugging her shoulders.

“It's full. Let's go somewhere else.”

Since they could not find a good shop, Tigre and Ellen sat in a square with a baked apple and rye alcohol.

“By the way, what did you want to talk about?”

With all topics exhausted and the day settling, Ellen asked as she took a drink.

Tigre glanced at the sack with the stuffed animal and history book, then turned to look at the object at Ellen's waist. After hesitating a little, he took the plunge and spoke.

“I've only read one of the history books, but there was a word I noticed. Arifal, is that the name of your sword?”

“Exactly.”

---

Ellen named the sword wrapped in a white cloth. Using a single finger, she revealed it.

The small portion between the sheath and the guard was tinged with an unnatural, undulating light.

The wind clung and tickled Tigre's hair.

“So this has been on your mind.”

“... It's as if the sword has its own intent.”

Tigre spoke while stroking his hair which was touched by the wind. Ellen laughed as she sheathed the sword.

“It is also called [Brilliant Beheader of the Fallen Spirit]<sup>Koma no Zanki</sup>. It is a weapon permitted only to the Vanadis.”

Tigre could not speak immediately. Though it was difficult to believe, Tigre had experienced it twice before. Including this time, it was his third time.

“The history books call this a [Dragonic Tool] which controls [Wind]. I don't know all the details, but... is this sword the cause of the wind?”

---

“To be more accurate, it can manipulate it. You've seen it before, but it was able to divert the arrow and lift an entire horse.”

“... Why did you not use it in Dinant against me?”

It was a desperate fight, which is why he felt it annoying that she had cut corners.

“Because it was fun.”

Tigre frowned upon hearing Ellen's prompt answer.

“At that time, I could have used it to strike your other arrows down, but I wanted to compete with your bow with only my skill.”

“You did a dangerous thing.”

Tigre looked at her with both amazement and confusion.

“It went well, so don't worry. What else did you want to talk about?”

“Do the other Vanadis have similar weapons?”

---

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Viralt

“Yes. They also have a [Dragonic Tool], though they aren't the same. Well, in all respects, they are tools beyond understanding.”

Removing her smile, Ellen spoke seriously, as if on the battlefield.

“The Vanadis is said to be able to fight one thousand troops. In reality, though a Vanadis is an excellent soldier, each wields a [Dragonic Tool] giving them the capability to fight an army of warriors. There are stories of Vanadis fighting three thousand, even five thousand enemies single handedly.”

Though monstrous words were stuck in Tigre's throat, he forced them down.

“Strange. Why didn't you invade Brune or Muozinel?”

Each of the seven people were, quite literally, a match for one thousand.

Even if half the troops were left behind to defend the country, if three or four of them were to fight, they could vastly expand their territory. They could not be blamed for their invasion if they won.

---

--- *Perhaps the King does not want such a thing.*

Ellen crossed her arms and looked at the sky, giving thought to an answer.

“Ultimately, it is because the King has not ordered us to.”

Due to the unexpectedly light remark, Tigre had no words to say.

Her words held no affection for royalty, she had spoken as if it were a joke. There was neither good will nor respect.

“... Do you dislike the King of Zhcted?”

“Though I don't hate him, I don't particularly like him. He is the King now, so I only contact him occasionally.”

As if remembering something displeasing, Ellen's beautiful face turned bitter.

“Our country is maintaining peace and stability for now. We have had decades, even a century in which we were unable to expand our lands. Though every King has been excellent in his own way, none were able to

---

properly conform to the presence of all seven Vanadis. Often, because they fear the Vanadis, they came to argue with us. Now, the Vanadis, while pretending to follow the King, scheme to appoint an appropriate person to lead."

"How terrible..."

While frowning, only those words could be expressed.

"None of the Vanadis wish to become king?"

"The Vanadis kneel to the King. The King is to be defended. Those who fight for the King cannot become the King."

Tigre inclined his head upon hearing her response.

*--- Is there some restriction they are bound to?*

Though it was beyond his understanding, it was not an impossible story.

The existence of a power that surpasses common sense, Tigre had already witnessed it.

---

“The present King is such a man. While the Vanadis kneel superficially before him, he does not have the ability to make them sincerely follow his lead, nor do we hold a will to do so. He doubts us and is alert for any sly actions. He thinks of how to reduce our power in fear it may turn on him. He is neither wise nor bold enough to attack another country.”

Ellen shook her argent hair and let out a deep sigh.

“I wish for someone with both traits, someone fluent in politics, someone who can be both kind and harsh. I wish for a King who is not swayed by emotion and overflows with a sense of justice...”

“It seems you've been having trouble.”

“--- There's no point in me complaining anymore, but really, I would like a better King.”

“... I see.”

--- *If only His Majesty, the King of this country, were a little better...*

---

Tigre had trouble thinking of this as another person's problem.

“However, if asked what I would change about the country, I would hesitate to say something. It is by his power that the citizens of LeitMeritz have a peaceful life. I don't think I would make a better King, since I would advance my own directives.”

“You shouldn't insult yourself so much.”

Tigre stopped her, hearing her self-ridicule.

“My family creed is [A hunter does not hold the arrow too long nor hunt the beast too often].”

“What does it mean?”

Ellen listened to Tigre's words with interest, her eyes wide open.

“Although the arrow is necessary to hunt, if used too often, it corrupts the land. Simply put, hunting in the mountains and forests is only fun if you don't do it all the time.”

---

“... You mean, everything in moderation?”

“Though it may sound arrogant of me, you believe too little in your ability. You should understand, having seen the town. The land now is not bad.”

Ellen's bright red eyes looked curiously at Tigre, who spoke earnestly.

“You...”

Her murmur was overshadowed by the blowing wind.

The cold air accompanied the wind, stroking her argent hair. The night sky approached.

“Just now, what...?”

Though Tigre asked with a frown, Ellen stood up energetically without responding.

“I did not think I would be comforted by you.”

She looked back at Tigre, the usual vibrancy returning to her smile.

“I'll say my thanks, though. I feel a bit better.”

---

*Is that so. It was odd, given their position, that he could cheer her up. Still, Tigre obediently thought it good.*

Though Ellen tried to throw away the basket holding the baked apple, she stopped, hearing a small cat with black hair at the root of a tree.

Ellen smiled happily and bent over, giving the apple core to the creature.

“Do you like cats?”

“I kept one long ago, since they were useful to ward off the rats. Right now, I only have Lunie... Do you have any?”

“Rather than saying I had a pet, when I was small, I helped take care of an old retired sheepdog.”

Tigre recalled those days, tilting his head.

“His body was large and he was always sleeping.”

“His body must have been a great pillow for a catnap, right?”

“That...”

---

Though Ellen had a boastful face, her words did not continue.

“Hyau!?”

Ellen let out a lovely scream and jumped aside, hanging on to Tigre. As she held him, Tigre inadvertently felt something unnecessary.

“Wha, what? What's with that voice that doesn't suit you?”

She lifted her foot and stamped down.

“Get back in that alley. I'll cut your tongue off so you can't say anything impolite again.”

The sound of her sword rang as she pulled it from her waist. She glared at Tigre with a red face.

“No, sorry. That was inappropriate.”

“Really... I've never screamed like that when faced with bears or boars.”

“...”

“--- You're thinking about it?”

The sword at her waist, the blade of silver-white, returned.

“I'm not, I'm not!”

Tigre denied while waving his hands hastily.

“But what could surprise you so much?”

Tigre looked at Ellen's feet and saw a shiny black insect, now twitching.

Tigre looked amazed, seeing the insect drive her to her tiptoes.

“Do you not see these often? The Imperial Palace... is well cleaned, and I suppose you wouldn't notice them on the battlefield.”

Tigre said that aloud out of sympathy.

By the way, Tigre was accustomed to seeing them, since they were on the mountains and in the forests when he hunted.

---

“If it's noticeable, no matter where, you hate what you hate.”

Ellen's expression clearly said she feared it rather than hated it.

Her face and gesture, much like a child's, was adorable. Tigre inadvertently laughed.

“Wha, what's so amusing?”

“No, I'm quite relieved to find even you can be weak to something.”

“You...”

Ellen's face was dyed crimson as she had trouble countering Tigre's words. With a snort, she changed tactics.

... She would go on the offensive.

Tigre was perplexed. Though his words were earnest, they may have offended her in some way.

---

However, he did not worry too much. Ellen took a few steps forward, her argent hair shaking as she moved. She looked over her shoulder and glared at Tigre.

“Let's go.”

Tigre ran after Ellen in a hurry.

When they returned to the Imperial Palace, Lim stood at the castle gate.

Though she normally did not show emotion on her face, it was clear from her ice-cold Irises that she was angry. Tigre involuntarily shrank back.

“You took your time.”

“The day hasn't ended yet. Here, a souvenir.”

---

Warding off the thorny voice, Ellen passed her the bag with a stuffed animal, and spoke in her normal tone. Though Lim had a face as if she wanted to say something to Tigre, she held back until she looked in the bag.

“... This, this is.”

“Do you like it? I wanted to get you a present, so I went to town for it.”

Ellen spoke fluently, proud as a peacock. It was not just anger flowing from Lim's body.

“By the way, were you looking for someone?”

“Unfortunately, it was you.”

“Got it. Still, I had company this time.”

After that, Lim cast her gaze to Tigre.

“... Why did you return? It must have been a heaven-sent opportunity for you to run away. Do you have the confidence to return? Are you foolish? Or perhaps you do not understand your situation.”

---

“You should applaud me for letting the opportunity pass.”

“I see, so you are a fool.”

Lim pointedly responded to Tigre's words.

“You shouldn't be so harsh. He came back, after all, and Tigre was the one to get you the present.”

When Ellen mediated from the side, Lim sank into an awkward silence.

“Lim, you may return to your room. I will guide Tigre.”

Ellen waved her hand away. Lim sighed and returned an unfriendly expression.

She bowed in silence and walked away while holding the bag. Tigre vacantly noticed her gait was light.

“Well, that's done. Now then, let's follow her.”

“Follow?”

Tigre looked at Ellen suspiciously.

---

“I'll show you something interesting.”

Ellen walked briskly with Tigre following after her. The soldiers saluted when they noticed her. Ellen lightly waved to them and returned their salute. Tigre noticed they nodded to him.

“I don't recognize the place we're going to.”

Tigre asked the question, since it had always been Rurick guiding him around the Palace.

“I suppose it's not unusual? The women's rooms are around here.”

They were in a straight corridor lined with rooms spaced at regular intervals. Girl's voices could be heard in some rooms.

“Is it fine?”

“I'm giving you permission. Walk quietly.”

Ellen halted in front of a certain room. After confirming no one was in the surroundings, she carefully drew her sword and uttered a small incantation.

---

The air moved. Tigre understood Ellen used the power of the Silver Flash. The face of the argent-haired Vanadis looked like a child playing a trick.

“Even if the door is opened, Lim will never hear a sound.”

“... Your sword will cry. At least, I would.”

Indeed, Tigre felt sorry for the sword. Tigre felt something at the scruff of his neck. It seemed as if the wind was grumbling. The sword seemed dissatisfied.

“Look, you. Don't you want to know what she'll do with our present?”

Certainly, Tigre was anxious when he saw the stuffed animal.

*--- Ellen said she wouldn't treat it poorly.*

Though there was no sound, there was a possibility he would be noticed. Tigre carefully opened the door, leaving enough space for the two to look through the crack.

---

Lim sat on the bed, hugging the bear. Though her face was not visible, it was easy to imagine her expression given her actions.

Tigre was amazed. More than what he saw, the number of stuffed animals inside surprised him.

It was unusual, given her cool impression. He had never considered it.

Tigre and Ellen continued to watch. Lim closely and happily embraced the bear.

“What should your name be. Alexei... I haven't used that yet... Your eyes are the color of a pomegranate... I wonder.”

--- *She's given it a name! Every one of them!*

It was his limit. He continued to erase his presence.

Tigre quietly closed the door and looked at Ellen. Her face showed her amusement.

---

“That's how it is. Yours, too, so you might want to give her another stuffed bear. She usually forgives me with that.”

## Awakening of the Magic Bullet

Tigre visited Ellen's office a few days after they walked around the castle town. Lim sat next to Ellen helping her process the documents.

“It's been a while. Do you have any business?”

Ellen looked at him and spoke with a light tone. Tigre responded with a serious expression.

“I wish to see some of the documents you work on. Of course, I don't expect you to allow me to see them all, just the ones you can.”

“Hmm?”

Ellen's bright red irises looked at him with surprise and interest.

“May I hear your reason?”

Lim looked up at Tigre and spoke in a tone as if she were interrogating him. Her expression showed she would not pardon an inappropriate reason.

---

Tigre scratched his head in embarrassment and answered honestly.

“When I return to Alsace, I thought I might be able to apply some of what I learn.”

He was embarrassed because his response truly was a simple one.

Chatting with Ellen as they walked through the town had a strong impact on Tigre.

“Lim, help him. You still haven't thanked him for the stuffed animal. This should be just right.”

“Eleanora-sama.”

Apparently she was being teased for her embarrassing hobby. Lim narrowed her blue eyes in indignation.

“Where will you work? It would be great if you could do it here, since we won't have to worry about losing any documents, and it will make it easier to kill you if you do anything.”

---

“Do it in his room. I have a responsibility to manage these documents he can't see.”

After being told off coldly, Lim and Tigre held many documents and left the office.

Rurick, who was standing nearby, was asked to prepare a table and chair as the two walked down the corridor.

“Is it fine leaving her alone?”

“She will be fine. There hasn't been much time since the last assassin appeared, and Eleanora-sama always has a reason when moving about in secret.”

Lim answered without looking at Tigre.

“Reason?”

“She goes to get alcohol, try out new dishes at her favorite restaurant, or clown around with minstrels once rumors appear in the Imperial Palace... No such talk has been found, so she will work diligently for a while.”

---

Rurick was made to help carry a table and chair to the crowded room.

“Thank you for your work, Rurick.”

Letting Rurick rest, Lim went across the table and sat face-to-face with Tigre.

“I have heard Alsace is a land filled with mountains and forests. Are you worried about flood control? Or perhaps field rights and irrigation? Or are you concerned about highway maintenance?”

“Since we are poor, I would like to avoid anything costly. It could take us five or ten years to save up.”

“I understand. Let's start there, then.”

For a moment, Tigre saw Lim smile. Though her face changed momentarily, it quickly returned to normal.

The documents, in a certain sense, were more difficult to read than history books since Tigre was still not good at reading the Zhcted language.

---

However, Tigre was surprised by how politely Lim taught him when he did not understand something. She was patient enough to help him until he understood.

Originally, they went through the documents at a slow pace. After one koku (approximately two hours), they had made their way through two-thirds of the pile. The two decided to take a break.

Lim called the maid for a drink.

“Thank you. I learned a lot.”

When Tigre thanked her, Lim shook her head.

“It is nothing spectacular. Though I have read these before, it allowed me to review things once again.”

Lim responded in a curt tone, then looked at Tigre in a hesitant manner. After finishing his drink, Tigre noticed her glancing at him, as if hesitating over what to say to him.

Lim, though hesitant, seemed to show expressions with an unusually amiable atmosphere.

“You – Do you believe you can return to Alsace?”

Tigre's expression froze. Silence filled the room. Her words were unforgiving.

Forty days had passed since Tigre was taken captive.

Fewer than ten remained.

If the ransom had been prepared, it would be time for a response letter to arrive.

However, there was no such report. She spoke as if Tigre had forgotten.

Eventually, Tigre laughed to break the silence.

“... Even if I consider the worst case scenario and the ransom has not been prepared, it would do me no good to become anxious.”

“I suppose that is true.”

“If I were distraught, it would be an insult to the people who worked hard for my sake.”

---

When he thought he might not see Teita again, he became anxious and lost sleep. Still, Tigre had faith in her.

At the very least, he wanted to give off that appearance. Though his feelings were a little different, it would be too embarrassing if he were to express his sentiments clearly.

“... I would say it is half anxiety, half vanity.”

He was easily seen through.

“However, I understand your feelings.”

Lim lowered her head to Tigre in apology, and the room became silent.

“We should complete our work soon, then.”

Putting her empty ceramic cup on the table, Lim smiled. Tigre was shocked to see such a soft expression. A moment later, Lim's face returned to its normally frozen expression.

---

It had become dark before they managed to work through the remaining documents.

“Thank you for the hard work.”

While bowing, Lim let out a deep breath. Tigre threw his body onto the bed and lay on his back.

Though he was the one to ask, he had read dozens of documents written in a foreign language. It was a difficult task.

“You may rest as you are. I will have Rurick bring you your dinner.”

“Thank you. You've saved me.”

Without returning a word, Lim left the room. After she closed the door, she let out a sigh.

“--- Did he work because he knows?”

Right now, an intense atmosphere has engulfed Brune.

The soldiers were ordered to not speak to Tigre of the situation in Brune, but such information could still leak.

---

“He has likely guessed it.”

After hesitating, Lim shook her head.

“Even if I tell him, he will only become uneasy...”

In Brune Kingdom, Massas was busy trying to help Tigre.

However, no one offered to help. Everyone was concerned with securing their own safety.

Duke Thenardier had heard from an intimate aristocrat.

The story came about while many aristocrats were gathered at a pavilion, drinking and chatting together.

The Duke frowned, hearing about Dinant.

“It was an awful battle. Due to others' foolishness, even my child was subject to defeat.”

The Duke had become 42 years old. His large physique and stunning black beard was wrapped in luxurious silk clothing. In his thirties, the kingdom sponsored him to join in battle. He always earned remarkable military services in battles against Zhcted.

His talent was also shown in the courts. Due to his skill, he was able to acquire a power which could silence even the King.

There was a difference between confidence and arrogance. There was no fear in his eyes.

Still, confidence becomes overconfidence, which often leads to cruelty. Though he continued such actions, no one stopped him.

“What happened in Dinant?”

“A young aristocrat, Earl Vorn, was made captive by the enemy's General, the Vanadis...”

---

“How deplorable. Instead of suicide, he settled for such a pathetic thing. He also left his companions alone. It is because of such people that we were defeated.”

After relentlessly abusing him verbally, the Duke nodded and continued his words.

“If I recall, that boy's only skill was with the bow. He was likely captured after throwing his bow aside and running away. If it was my child, he would fight bravely until his sword or spear shattered.”

The aristocrat, who was a guest, needed to lessen the Duke's anger lest he snap.

--- Even the Duke was a parent. He had learned of the abomination of Dinant from his son. What kind of face did he have at the time?

Zaien, the son of Duke Thenardier, ran away, leaving those to his left and right behind, the moment he heard of the supreme commander, the Prince, dying on the battlefield.

---

Though the Duke did not know about it, the aristocrat did not wish to tell him. Although his anger was without reason, it was not particularly harmful.

“Lord Massas, who is intimate with Earl Vorn, seems to be preparing a ransom for him. What shall we do, Duke?”

“He wishes to ask me? Does he expect me to help this shameless action?”

The Duke's thick hands shook as the aristocrat continued speaking.

“Think about it. Even an aristocrat who is beyond your help may be useful, your excellency. Your mercy may become effective in fighting Sir Ganelon.”

The war between Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon was unavoidable.

It was recognized by the domestic aristocrats. The citizens thought so as well.

Thenardier's wife was the King's niece. The husband of Ganelon's elder sister was the King's nephew.

---

Since Ganelon was connected through the King's elder sister, he was farther from power. The rights to the throne in Brune gave priority to men, as is typically the case.

The present King had neither brother nor child, only a niece and a nephew. Neither would compromise on the position of who would ascend to the throne.

“Will you answer their terms before Duke Ganelon... It may act as a catalyst for those who still waver.”

Contact with the Duke, whether as an ally or not, was desirable.

However, the Duke refused.

“Though it is not a bad plan, I will not do such a thing for a coward.”

After the guests left, the Duke called a servant after a sudden thought.

“Prepare a map.”

Looking at the map brought by the servant, he confirmed the location of Alsace.

---

“So this is his land.”

A sigh of disappointment leaked from the Duke.

Alsace was not only distant from the center of the kingdom but small. The majority of the land was mountains or forests. It was said there was not much there, and it was difficult to catch anything.

“However... It is in contact with the Zhcted border. That cannot be overlooked.”

After thinking for a while, the Duke called for his son.

“You called for me, Father?”

Zaien appeared before his father. He was a young noble with an appropriate appearance and garb.

“I wish for you to do something.”

The Duke beckoned to his son and pointed at a place on the map.

“Do you know of Alsace? Take three thousand soldiers with you and burn it to the ground.”

---

Zaien frowned. He was not surprised by his father's cruel instruction. He thought of the trouble, remembering it was a distant land under Tigre's care.

"I will not refuse your instructions, Father, but may I hear the reason?"

The Duke first told the story he heard from the aristocrat.

"The Lord of Alsace is absent. Though the land is hardly worth taking, I would rather Ganelon not plunder it. It would be even more troublesome if Zhcted took control."

"Indeed. However, to send three thousand troops to such a small land, isn't that too much?"

"Though there is nothing there, the people may be very territorial. Kill all who resist, capture and take all you can carry. We can sell the objects and people to Muozinel. Any good looking women, you can give to the soldiers."

Zaien was delighted to hear his father's words.

“Thank you, Father. This will help with soldier morale as well. I suppose it will be unnecessary to gather the Knights then.”

“No, take at least one thousand Knights. Pass through the lands of other nobles and display your strength. Show them House Thenardier.”

“As you wish. By the way...”

Zaien lowered his voice, now speaking as father and son.

“What of His Majesty, the King?”

“He is in his room as usual. He is mentally and physically weak from what I hear. It is doubtful he will live for even another month. With the Prince out of the way, it will be a good thing if he dies.”

Hearing the Duke gloat, Zaien's eyes looked fearful.

... There was a rumor that his father and Duke Ganelon had cooperated to murder His Highness, the Prince...

---

He oppressed the people of his territory. Though Zaien thought of it as simply crushing insects, he still held respect for the King and Prince as a vassal of the Royal Family.

He looked on in fear and awe at his father who easily overstepped the boundary.

--- *So the rumor was true.*

Thinking about it, though, he had no reason to disobey

He bowed his head. After preparing his troops, he set out for Alsace.

“Zaien-sama.”

A voice came from behind Zaien as he left his father's room and was walking down a corridor. Turning around, he noticed an elder man wearing a black robe.

Zaien frowned in disgust.

“What is it, Drekavac?”

Drekavac was the old man who stooped forward.

“It seems you are going to battle, Zaien-sama. I will give you a present.”

“A present? You'll give one to me?”

Zaien's grimace became more severe.

This elderly man was a soothsayer who served the Thenardier family for many years.

However, Zaien had never once liked Drekavac. Rather, he hated him enough to kill him. He wanted to discard the man rather than spend the money on him.

He had not done so, though, because the man had been appointed by his father.

Zaien could do nothing when it came to his father's men, but he avoided seeing Drekavac as much as possible.

“Please, come this way.”

Drekavac turned his head back and began walking. Zaien reluctantly followed.

---

They left the hall and headed toward the stables.

As they approached the stable filled with the hated smell of animals, Zaien tried to yell out negligently. Drekavac, however, took a detour to the back.

“In here.”

Drekavac lifted a cloth with his hand. Underneath were the heads of Dragons.

One was an Earth Dragon and one was a Wyvern, both eighty chet (approximately eight meters) in height. They boasted huge bodies with short, stocky limbs and strong scales covering their entire body, protecting them from sword and spear. A Dragon could quickly rush with enough force to destroy a wall and had strength and vitality.

The Wyvern's huge wings could be used to let a human fly. Though its scales were hard, they were not as strong as the Earth Dragon's.

“... Oh.”

---

Zaien was overwhelmed, since it was the first time he had ever seen a Dragon. He thought their existence was a myth or a fairy tale. It was beyond his knowledge.

“Their training is almost complete. Even if you released them on the battlefield today, they would work splendidly.”

“Is, is it really okay?”

“Of course. You can touch them if you wish.”

Though hesitant, Zaien was curious, seeing a Dragon for the first time. His obstinacy won over his fear. He carefully stepped toward the Wyvern.

Though the Wyvern bowed abruptly, as if it was shy, it remained still when his palm touched it.

Zaien took a deep breath, feeling the rough scales.

“... I hope it is to your liking.”

“Yes. Well done, Drekavac. I'll ride this Wyvern!”

His poor mood from a while ago was completely blown away. Zaien gave words of appreciation to the old man.

Where did he catch the Dragons? How were they trained? He did not think of it at all.

“... There is only one thing you must be wary of.”

“What?”

“The Dragon has not become accustomed to the scent of human residences. Please, do not bring it into the city.”

Though Zaien frowned, he recalled the story that Dragons lived in uninhabited recesses in mountains and disliked the smell of man. Though he did not know if it were true, he felt it reasonable.

*--- Well, I won't be entering any towns. It will be intimidating enough to simply walk with it visible.*

Zaien's heart throbbed, imagining such a spectacle.

Only two days remained until the ransom deadline.

--- *Is it impossible?*

Tigre lay in bed and rolled around, staring at the darkness. He had woken up in the middle of the night. The first time this happened was a few nights ago.

Sleeping soundly until midday did not change. Though he tried not to worry, he could not change the condition of his body.

“Like I thought... I'm afraid.”

It was the fate of his future. He may be thrown into a situation he would not survive.

A knock was heard on the door. It was small enough such that he would not notice had he been asleep.

“At this time...?”

He was wary, since he was not allowed to keep even a knife. Tigre opened the door while tightening his grip on his bow.

“Oh, you came.”

Rurick stood before him, holding a candlestick. The small flame flicked. It was difficult to see anything beyond Rurick.

“What's wrong?”

Seeing him act differently, Tigre quieted his voice.

Rurick whispered an explanation.

“Lord Tigrevurmud, there is a person who wishes to meet you. Can you follow me? Try to make as little noise as possible.”

Tigre nodded.

In the pitch dark passage of the night, the two carefully walked. It seems they were moving so as not to alert the other soldiers, since they advanced through passages different from the norm.

---

Tigre arrived at the training area.

One elderly person sat enclosed by several soldiers. His face, lit by a soldier's torch, was well known to Tigre.

--- *Batran!*

Nearly letting out his voice, Tigre rushed to Batran, ignoring the soldiers, and took his hand.

“Young Lord! Young Lord! You are safe and sound!”

“You, too, thank goodness! Really, thank goodness! Did Lord Massas survive? What of Teita? And Alsace?”

While tightly grasping the old man's hands, tears fell from his eyes. Tigre cried from the bottom of his heart. The surrounding soldiers were surprised, impatient, and panicked.

“Tigre-san, your voice, your voice.”

“Ah, Ah, sorry.”

After being scolded, Tigre apologized, since he intended to keep his voice down.

---

Tigre noticed the soldiers at last and saw them associating frankly.

“Thank goodness. You're all acquainted.”

Rurick, having caught up, smiled in relief.

“This elderly man unexpectedly sneaked into the Imperial Palace. Since he spoke with the accent of Brune, he was captured. When I brought up Lord Tigrevurmud's name by chance, he persisted that we introduce you to him.”

“Fate was kind.”

One of the soldiers shrugged his shoulders.

“It was good that those who dislike you did not catch him. They probably would have injured him without asking any questions.”

“Even if there was no one so extreme, so long as Limlisha was not informed, he would be imprisoned without meeting you.”

“Everyone, thank you.”

Tigre wiped the tears from his eyes as he thanked the soldiers.

“Please don't worry. It's not like we can figure what to do from now on, either.”

One of the soldiers made a difficult face.

“We will have to report that an old man came to help you escape and arrest him. Also, you will need to return to your room obediently.”

Though they had a friendship with Tigre, they still served Ellen. There was a limit to what they could do.

“I'm sorry if this ends with you being scolded.”

“I understand. Batran, I want to hear what's going on...”

Tigre wanted to confirm Teita's safety. He asked Batran, who was shedding tears.

“Young Lord, three thousand troops belonging to Duke Thenardier are advancing toward Alsace...”

“... What do you mean?”

---

Tigre was confused. He could not understand.

Certainly, he did not get along with Zaien or Duke Thenardier, but the soldiers would not be moved on emotion alone. The King would not permit such an action.

Alsace was not even adjacent to Duke Thenardier's territory. It was between the lands of other aristocrats.

Influential nobles passed over his home.

“I do not know how to tell you...”

Using his withered arms to wipe his tears, Batran took a deep breath as he took a letter from his breast pocket.

“This is a letter from Lord Massas. Actually, he has provided a map and a horse...”

Tigre took the letter and quickly read it after impatiently cutting the seal. There was first an apology for being unable to prepare the ransom. Alsace was peaceful for the time being. Also, it was written that Teita went to the temple to pray every night.

--- *Teita...*

---

Though Tigre was moved to tears, his body went hot with anger after reading the following sentence. Duke Thenardier dispatched three thousand soldiers to burn Alsace and would sell the people he captured to Muozinel.

In addition, Duke Ganelon knew about it and was trying to move his soldiers ahead of time.

He would do his best to suppress Ganelon, so he wanted Tigre to escape from Zhcted in any way he could.

“They're doing whatever the hell they want...!”

By the time he noticed, Tigre had crushed the letter in his hand.

His overflowing anger could not be suppressed as he clenched his teeth.

Mutters leaked from the soldiers surrounding Batran and Tigre. They were showing their grief and mourning; it was a failure in their behavior. They had unexpectedly become too kind to Tigre.

“Lord Tigrevurmud...”

---

The soldiers exchanged glances, trying to push the unpleasant role on another person. Rurick advanced as he spoke.

“Though I sympathize with your feelings, I implore you, please return to your room.”

“It is poor of me, but I cannot comply.”

Placing the letter into his clothes, Tigre stood up and walked toward the castle gate, He was surrounded within five steps.

“Please return.”

Rurick stared at Tigre, his tone now stronger.

“I do not wish to be rough. No, you are to have the death penalty if you approach the rampart. I will be forced to tell Vanadis-sama.”

“I understand, but I will still leave.”

Though his voice was quiet, it was terrible and daunting to those who heard.

---

Rurick was accustomed to war. He was far from timid, being a veteran.

Still, hearing Tigre's voice and glance, he was overwhelmed by his fighting spirit. Due to the thirst for blood Tigre released, he could only move away.

Extending his hand, Tigre walked forward, thrusting Rurick aside.

“It's quite noisy...”

Hearing a bright voice, Tigre stopped his feet.

“Where are you going so late at night?”

Folding her arms, Ellen stood at the castle gate, her silver-white hair bathed in the moonlight. It shined and scattered, like fine particles.

Seeing their Lord, Rurick and the other soldiers bent to their knees. Respect, fear, and anxiety engrossed them.

Though the Vanadis was known to be tolerant, she was by no means sweet.

---

“I believe I said you are not to approach the rampart.”

Though it was midnight, Ellen was dressed in a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt and skirt. Her sword was at her waist.

“So you noticed.”

She would not be sleeping in those clothes, and she would not have the time to show up after getting dressed.

“I could also come out in the clothes I sleep in, but would you be able to recognize me?”

Tigre did not associate with her familiar, teasing tone.

“Please, let me pass. I must return to Alsace.”

“Did you forget your position? Tell me your reason for the time being.”

Though the time it would take to explain was regrettable, Tigre spoke the content of the letter sent by Massas.

“Do you have any evidence to guarantee its certainty?”

---

“None. Though... if it is Thenardier, it is likely to happen.”

*Please.* Tigre was pleading in desperation.

“It will be too late once my home has been burned. Please let me leave. I will return for sure.”

Ellen had not responded. She looked down, as if thinking about something. A mysterious light could be seen in her bright red eyes, as if praising Tigre.

“If you go to Alsace, what will you do?”

“I will defend my people.”

Tigre answered in irritation, not understanding the meaning behind Ellen's question.

“How?”

“How...?”

He found himself at a loss for words.

“I know your skills with the bow, however, you are not an immortal hero. Can you do this alone? You may

---

be confident in your skill, but you would be a fool to think you could fight three thousand alone.”

“I know that.”

“Even if you understand, you will go?”

“However, what... what else can I do!”

“Such a haphazard man. Do you really think you can do anything once you get there?”

Even if he shouted, he was cut short immediately.

Ellen sighed, seeing him and placed her hand on the Silver Flash at her waist.

“--- Escape calls for capital punishment. Are you tired of living? If you are heading to your death in Alsace, it might be better to end your life here in LeitMeritz.”

Unsheathing the blade, she pointed its tip to Tigre with a straight arm.

“So you... will not let me pass.”

Tigre glared at Ellen in resentment. He was behaving like a spoiled child, unable to bring forth better words.

He understood. He understands why Ellen was doing what she was.

“Why don't you understand me?”

Her tone had unexpectedly changed. Ellen continued to scold him.

“Why are you not using the wisdom you had in Dinant when you improved your chances, even in such a situation? Why do you move on your emotions now?”

“What are you saying...”

Though Tigre was confused by Ellen's words, he stared at her bright red irises and swallowed his words. He had not considered it... Right now, what could he do?

Tigre would die by Ellen's sword if he could not answer.

He had a bow in his hand, but no arrow.

What he wanted to do. What he should do.

The sword reflected light and shined. Tigre could not help but glance at it. Suddenly, a question sprang to his mind.

--- *Why has Ellen not felled me in this situation? Why has she not ordered Rurick to capture me?*

She understood the ransom could no longer be paid at this time.

Though Ellen was not obsessed with money, she made a clear distinction, saying she would sell him to Muozinel

.

She no longer needed to say anything.

... *It could be.*

Tigre arrived at an answer.

Ellen was trying to employ him in the most efficient way possible.

She was giving him the chance.

*Will you serve me?*

Ellen asked that of Tigre before.

It might still be valid.

--- *This is my only opportunity.*

If he made a mistake, Ellen would forsake him.

He took a small breath then let it out. Tigre calmed his breathing to settle down.

*Is this the same as when I faced her in Dinant? My body is tense, and my knees are trembling.*

“... I have a request.”

Tigre bowed to Ellen.

“Please, lend me your soldiers.”

On his knees, Rurick's breath stopped momentarily.

--- Amongst the soldiers, he was his best friend...!

As a captive, it was unprecedeted that he ask to be loaned the soldiers.

“Ha... Haha! Ahahaha!”

Ellen's eyes opened wide. Though Tigre watched the face full of amazement, her body was bent over, bursting in laughter.

To say nothing of Tigre, even the soldiers had never seen Ellen laugh like this.

“Really... somehow, your impudence is refreshing.”

Though Ellen laughed for more than a minute, once it ended, she wiped the tears in the corner of her eyes as she looked at Tigre.

He wondered what he said would make her so happy. Even the breeze seemed to sway happily.

“You want me to lend them to you, but I'm not that nice. Naturally, I can't do it for free.”

“What do you want?”

“All of Alsace.”

“... So long as you govern it in the same manner as LeitMeritz.”

Though he thought it needless to say, it was a necessary promise to defend the people within his territory.

“I can't govern it exactly the same, but I'll keep that in mind.”

Ellen asked him with her glance. Tigre nodded his head in assent.

“Then, let's go!”

Ellen sheathed the Silver Flash and turned to the Palace. Lim stood beside her with a spear. With excitement in her voice, Ellen shouted an order.

“Lim, this is war! Grab the Black <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Dragon Flag.”

Under Ellen's command, one thousand soldiers would head to Alsace.

Though only one-third the number of enemy, there were many circumstances.

First, she gave priority to speed.

A large army's movements were dull.

It also took time to prepare the weapons and food needed to feed the soldiers. It was also necessary to pass through the path in the Vosyes Mountains.

But the number could not be too small, or else they could not fight.

Due to these factors, one thousand troops were deemed necessary.

It was composed almost entirely of cavalry. As for the horses, three times the number was prepared.

A large amount of substitution horses were prepared so as to increase the marching distance.

---

“I was surprised.”

In Ellen's private room, Lim helped put on her armor, expressing her surprise with an indifferent expression.

“I never thought he would ask you to lend him the soldiers.”

“Your expectations were not met, either.”

Ellen responded happily.

Lim promptly noticed Batran sneaking into the Imperial Palace, as well as his capture by the soldiers.

She guessed they would allow Tigre and Batran to meet. Lim reported to Ellen, saying he likely came to free Tigre. Ellen quickly changed clothes and moved to the castle gate.

At that time, Lim and Ellen made a bet.

Ellen would show up at the castle gate and would not allow Tigre to escape.

What would Tigre say when cornered, what actions would he take?

---

Lim thought Tigre would challenge Ellen with the bow. If he won, he would escape.

Ellen felt Tigre would recall their conversation and thought he would ask to be her subordinate. In doing so, his territory would become hers, and Ellen would use her soldiers to defend it.

If he tried to force his way through or escape in any other way, she would cut him down.

“Well, the answer was closer to my idea, so it's closer to being my win, Lim.”

“No. If your words had not led him to his decision, you would have lost, Eleanora-sama.”

“I asked a simple question. I did not guide him.”

“If you act as normal, Eleanora-sama, you would force him using any means possible.”

“I'm not that violent.”

“Have you forgotten what you said in Dinant?”

Though Ellen was heated up, Lim countered gently. Now there was only silence.

Before long, Ellen finished donning her armor. The gauntlets, greaves, and breastplates emphasized lightness and ease of movement. There was no helmet.

Lim wore a different armor, her body was encased in a hardened shell. Ellen was a Vanadis, and she held the argent blade. Lim would never go to the battlefield with such an appearance.

A knock sounded at the door. When Lim opened the door, Tigre stood before her.

“Are you finished?”

Inviting him inside, Lim responded to Tigre's question.

Having jumped into Tigre's view was Ellen's appearance as she donned a cloak, providing a blue background to contrast her armor. She stood proudly with her hands on her hips.

“Look until you're satisfied. You won't have time on the battlefield.”

---

She spoke proudly like a child. Though Tigre expected her to speak words like a princess, he minded his manners while thinking of Ellen.

“Have you completed your preparations?”

“It is as you can see.”

Tigre wore leather gauntlets and armor. His shin guards and mantle were also made of leather.

With bow in hand and a quiver at his waist, he was armed as he was when taken prisoner from Dinant.

“Your collar is bent.”

“Right. And your hair, it is better to comb it down a little.”

“You can use my comb, Lim.”

Ellen's hand extended and touched the scruff of Tigre's neck. Lim touched Tigre's hair. Urged from the right and left by the two and unable to let out his bewilderment, Tigre stood straight, maintaining his appearance as much as possible while being groomed.

---

When they finished, the two gazed at Tigre.

“Your armor is leather... Though embezzled, it's faded and looks solid. Though it is not bad for battle, as one leading the army...”

“Well, there is no time, since we did not see this coming.”

The two pat Tigre's body here and there.

Though he understood they had no ulterior motive, Tigre felt a strange excitement and tension. He desperately maintained his presence of mind.

Even his breathing had stopped, and he remained still like a statue. So as not to cause a strange reaction with his body, he continued to recite the names of Gods in his mind. Certainly the Gods whose name he recited were annoyed by it.

“Let's go.”

At last, parting from Tigre, Ellen turned about and walked out to the hallway. Lim followed after Ellen. Tigre, in a panic, hastily pursued the two.

---

“With fewer than half the enemy, can you win?”

“It is possible.”

Hearing Lim's words, Ellen responded as if it were nothing.

“First, we have the geographical advantage.”

Seeing the Vanadis glance at him from the side, Tigre began explaining.

“Though it's true we have an advantage in terms of geography, people following Duke Thenardier have visited Alsace in the past. It has been a few years since then, but it is possible they have marked the area down. Still, I can draw a map, and if we return to my residence, there is an even more elaborate map drawn by my grandfather.”

“I see, they think of Alsace as a kind of resort. They won't expect resistance.”

Hearing Tigre's words, Ellen responded happily.

“I have heard Ganelon is at odds with Thenardier. Thenardier can't spare too many forces to attack Alsace. That should give us a good opportunity.”

Seeing her bright red irises filled with a will to fight, Tigre looked at Ellen once again.

The armor Ellen wore was beautiful in itself.

However, it was not perfect.

With the light in her eyes, she was complete as a Vanadis.

This Goddess of War was beautiful and dignified – an embodiment of something mythical. He looked on in admiration of her beauty. Tigre stared at the Vanadis with silver-white hair without speaking.

“Instead of simply admiring me, why not put it into words, like saying how beautiful I am.”

Ellen teased him as always.

“That was the thought that appeared in my mind when I first set eyes on you in Dinant.”

---

Contrary to the affection in his words, he spoke frankly without being smug.

“... Is, is that so.”

When he said that, Ellen's blue mantle quickly fluttered as she quickly turned around, hiding her face which had turned red from the unexpected words.

There were few people along the way to Celesta in the middle of summer.

To escape from the Thenardier Army, the people fled to the mountains and forests in the suburbs.

The soldiers who received instruction from Massas were guided by the maid, Teita.

“Those who are sturdy, go to the mountains or the forests in the outskirts. For the elderly and children, please take refuge in the shrine.”

This was written in the letter sent by Massas.

“He is a man of Brune, so he cannot attack a shrine. Even should Thenardier be a man who does not fear God, if he attacks a shrine, the temples will align themselves with Ganelon. Thenardier will definitely not interfere with them.”

The soldiers moved in accordance to his instructions.

Tigre, the Lord of Alsace, was absent. The village chiefs and various influential people of the town were at a loss as to what to do, so they were thankful for Massas' guidance.

“Teita, will you take shelter outside of town?”

“I will remain in the mansion.”

After seeing the people to the shelter, Teita responded to the soldier's question.

---

“Tigre-sama will surely return. When he does, I do not wish the residence to be uninhabited. I wish to be the first to receive him.”

Though the soldier tried to think of words to persuade her, he gave up.

Many people had taken shelter. Teita, every time she was asked, responded in the same way. She only wished to wait for Tigre.

“I understand; however, tell me at any time if you wish to escape.”

“Thank you very much.”

Teita bowed with a smile, her chestnut-brown twin tails shaking with her action. She then returned to the mansion.

The reason she gave to the soldier was not a lie.

However, she had another reason she could not easily explain.

If she left the mansion, Tigre may not return.

Though it was not so well-grounded, Teita felt a vague insecurity.

*--- It's fine. Batran will certainly return with Tigre-sama. I only need to wait in the mansion for Tigre-sama. I hope he returns soon...*

Despite her anxiety, she continued to hope. Embracing the black bow, the heirloom of his family, Teita prayed Tigre would return safe and sound.

*--- I do not wish to evacuate.*

Massas' letter gave the number of days available to evacuate the people before Thenardier's Army appeared, but she did not seem to think about it.

The biggest reason was the absence of the Lord, Tigre, though another reason existed.

The people who lived in Alsace originally had a poor sense of crisis when it came to war. This was even more so since the land had only small towns and villages.

Highways did not pass through Alsace; mountains and forests were everywhere.

---

It was disadvantageous for the movement or deployment of large armies. Other regions would not aim for Alsace, so there was little reason for military forces to pass through. Except for soldiers, none were familiar with war.

Furthermore, they did not know of Thenardier's cruelty.

The aristocrats of Alsace, Tigre and Urz, were on intimate terms with Massas, and the aristocrats governing the adjoining territories were all affable.

They did not seriously consider the situation with the Thenardier Army.

--- *If Tigre-sama returns...*

Teita went to his bed, desperately holding back her urge to cry.

Given the number of days since Batran left Celesta, he should have returned.

--- *Is it impossible? Will Tigre-sama not return?*

Tigre did not return that day either.

---

The Thenardier Army, led by Zaien, was moving on foot and would reach Alsace in two days.

Zaien advanced before his three thousand strong army with a grand attitude atop the Wyvern<sup>Vyfal</sup>.

Once, he tried flying in the sky with the Wyvern, but gave up due to the cold winds cutting into him. It was also faster than expected, so he had the Wyvern walk.

*--- Flying across the sky with a Wyvern is unexpectedly difficult. The sensation is too different from a horse, so I'll practice once I return from my duty.*

Behind the Wyvern was an Earth Dragon. The pressure exuded by its massive size and strength gave fear to the soldiers. They kept as much distance as possible while marching.

---

Though Zaien had passed through the territory of two or three nobles, he had not encountered any interference.

Everyone feared the house of Thenardier.

Zaien felt comfortable.

“As soon as we burn Alsace, we'll send the hostages ahead and stop by these regions. It might be good to have them pledge loyalty, and we can grab their wives and daughters...”

His father might be pleased as well, since his battle with Ganelon would follow soon after.

Zaien thought of such things cheerfully when a scout returned to report.

“The residents have taken shelter?”

“It seems the majority have fled to the forests and mountains.”

“The rest?”

“They have barricaded themselves within the temple. We cannot interfere.”

---

“Crafty...”

Zaien's teeth were seen.

“Very well. Let's leave the villages for now and head for Celesta first.”

“No, that's fine. We'll continue to Celesta as we are.”

Zaien shook his head hearing his subordinate's proposal.

“Certainly, we can't destroy the temple, but we can destroy everything else. We just have to burn it all. The people will give up and leave the temple for sure.”

Zaien smiled when another subordinate appeared to report.

“Someone has arrived, claiming to be a man from Celesta who wishes to act as your eyes, Zaien-sama.”

“What kind of person is he?”

“He has two names. The old man seems reasonably influential as well.”

---

Zaien, having been told bluntly, lost interest.

“Kill him. Throw his corpse in the town.”

The man with two names was the first victim from Alsace.

The wall enclosing Celesta was not too high or thick. Attacking it would not require siege weapons.

It would not take much time to destroy it.

The castle gate could be broken using an axe or a spear. Zaien remembered Drekavac's words regarding the Earth <sup>Suro</sup> Dragon's ability to break through walls just by charging.

“Surround the temple. We will raise our voices and tire them mentally and physically. Not only will we deprive them of their freedom, we will burn their home.”

Zaien spoke loudly, and the soldiers' chests swelled with expectation.

---

“However, it is important not to kill or destroy too much. Treat the women with courtesy, and punish the rest.”

This was not a fight but a pillage.

He gave approval to the soldiers to release their rage and brutality.

They would break into houses, take the money and possessions, then set fire to the building.

Those who ran and screamed, trying to escape, would be assaulted. Those who resisted would be pierced with a spear. Their blood painted the earth.

The wreckage and rubble of buildings and stalls were scattered, the gardens and vineyards were mercilessly trampled. With a sword in the right hand and a bottle, stolen from somewhere, in the left, the soldiers staggered about town, intoxicated on alcohol and destruction.

Laughter reminiscent of a barbarian was mixed in with the sounds. Black smoke streaked the sky.

---

Though the dead numbered few, this was due to Zaien's strict orders. The elderly who were not considered worthwhile were mercilessly slaughtered.

“Hm, this village is so tiny, it was easy to demolish.”

Zaien was away from the army with the Dragons and horses, watching calmly. The sight of people begging and trying to escape filled Zaien's heart.

Zaien stepped onto the street and pulled his horse up to a building. It was a large estate in comparison to the surrounding houses. Given its size and location, it belonged to the Lord.

“So this is Vorn's house. It's such a shabby structure for an aristocrat's manor. I'll have a look inside before I set fire to it.”

Zaien dismounted his horse and entered the mansion with the intent to ridicule it.

Teita was in the mansion.

When the Thenardier Army appeared outside of town, Teita wished to face them as Tigre's representative. She was stopped by others, though, and remained in the mansion. Three thousand troops quietly flooded in like a sea of silver. After a time, those who went forth as representatives were returned as corpses.

Now, they were burning, looting, and destroying the town.

“... Tigre-sama!”

From the first floor of the house, Teita watched the devastation with a bitter expression.

She could not do anything, her body remained still from shock, sadness, and fear.

She felt powerless; tears spilled from Teita's eyes.

The door was loudly opened. Teita returned to her senses.

---

--- *The first floor? Did someone come in?*

Her body stiffened. She knew someone had entered.

--- *Tigre-sama, please give me courage.*

Teita moved into the hallway, tightly hugging the black bow. She descended the stairs to the first floor.

A young man stood in the hall, looking at the candlestick in the corner. He kicked it over while laughing, the sound resounding through the mansion.

“Who's there?”

Her voice trembled.

The young man – Zaien Thenardier – turned around slowly.

His two eyes looked over Teita's body, as if licking it. Teita shuddered from the ill feeling.

“What a good looking girl. If you bow down to me, I might even hold you.”

“... Please leave.”

---

Teita squeezed those words out of her mouth.

Zaien looked doubtful and laughed as he brought a hand to his ear.

“Did I hear you wrong? Is Vorn's maid really that stupid? Please, say it again.”

“... Get out.”

“What?”

“I told you to go away!”

With a red face, Teita shouted at Zaien.

“This house, this town, Tigre-sama's possessions, do not lay a finger on them! Get out!”

“... You would say that to the son of House Thenardier.”

Zaien pulled out the sword at his waist.

“Abusive language has a heavy crime. Looks like I'll have to teach you the hard way.”

---

Teita's eyes opened widely as she breathed in deeply. She retreated, one step, two steps.

Zaien held back his laughter in his throat.

The glittering sword drew an arc. Teita's skirt was greatly torn, her pure-white thighs, nearly showing their base, were bare to see.

“What is it? If you don't hurry and run, I'll cut your leg next.”

Teita turned her back on Zaien and ran up the stairs. Zaien followed after her with a cruel smile, as if hunting prey, moving up the steps slowly.

Teita returned to the second floor and ran straight to Tigre's room. She closed the door, and, with a trembling hand, bolted it, though she failed many times.

--- *What do I do? What do I do now...*

Even with the door bolted, she did not feel easy. He would arrive at the room soon, and there was nothing to block the door. Teita looked about the room with a fearful expression.

---

When Teita's eyes saw Tigre's desk, she ran up to it.

"If I remember, there was a knife Tigre-sama used..."

She wildly opened the drawer and found a knife.

Gripping the handle, Teita exhaled in relief, noticing again that one arm was embracing his bow.

She looked around the room and, after hesitating a moment, ran to the semi-circular balcony.

Though it was noisy beneath the balcony, she could not look below. The sound of something breaking could be heard behind her.

When she turned around, she noticed Zaien had used his sword to create a hole. After breaking through the bolt, he kicked the door down, standing with a distorted smile.

"We're done already?"

Teita grasped the knife in both her hands, pointing it toward Zaien who continued to laugh scornfully. She attacked him in desperation. Zaien stepped into the room and brandished his sword.

---

He knocked the knife away in an unsatisfying manner. A red line ran across Teita's chest. She stepped backward until she was cornered at the balcony.

She leaned back while gripping the black bow. Her face was dyed red in anger and embarrassment. Tears floated to her eyes as she embraced the bow while hiding her chest. The wind shook her chestnut-brown hair.

“Tigre-sama...”

“What's this, a lowly maid who doesn't understand her position and holds feelings for her master?”

Zaien calmly pointed his sword at Teita as he muttered an insult.

“Vorn will definitely be sold off to Muozinel. I'll do the same to you. Maybe you'll be lucky and meet him.”

“No, Tigre-sama... Tigre-sama will surely come!”

“How brave. It'll be nice if you call out his name when you're under me.”

Zaien gripped Teita's shoulders and threw her down with all his strength.

---

Teita moaned. She closed her tear-filled eyes and cried Tigre's name in her mind.

Zaien put his weight on Teita.

--- It sounded.

A short, slow, sound.

“Wh... at?”

Zaien could not believe it as he looked at his hand.

It was the hand he had just stretched out to Teita.

An arrow was running through it.

--- *Where...?*

Rather than feeling pain, it was a chill that ran down Zaien's spine.

It would be difficult to aim through the narrow gap of a balcony railing, especially since this was the second floor.

“Teita!”

---

Beneath the balcony, a voice called to her.

Teita opened her eyes and thrust Zaien, who was stunned, aside.

“Tigre-sama!”

Standing up, Teita cried tears of joy.

The boy with red hair and a bow was riding on horseback.

Teita, every day, every night, prayed for him to return safely.

“Jump, Teita!”

Placing his bow in the saddle, Tigre cried while extending his arms.

Teita, without any signs of hesitation, shook away Zaien's hands as he tried to capture her and jumped over the balcony.

At the same time, the horse Tigre rode stumbled with a broken foot and sprawled forward.

---

--- *I can't reach Teita... I won't make it.*

Tigre shouted.

Stepping on the saddle, he jumped off the horse.

Tigre stretched his hands as far as he could to reach the falling Teita.

They touched.

In the air, Tigre strongly embraced Teita's delicate body.

Though the two looked as if they had been thrown to the ground, they were not injured. Immediately before crashing into the earth, a mysterious wind wrapped around the two. Tigre and Teita landed softly.

Teita's skirt floated, swaying in the wind.

“--- You did something crazy for this girl, really.”

Argent hair fluttered as she walked to Tigre.

She lowered the longsword in her grasp. Ellen looked down with an amazed expression from atop her horse.

---

She used the wind to help Tigre. Hearing Ellen speak, Tigre understood that.

“I don't expect anything in return... but if I didn't help you, wouldn't you have been injured? If you landed poorly, you could have died.”

“I was counting on you.”

While sitting up, Tigre thanked Ellen. His eyes turned to the balcony.

“So Zaien is in the house...”

However, Zaien no longer appeared. He must have run inside.

“Zaien?”

“Thenardier's son. He is the current heir.”

“Ho, so he's probably their Commander.”

Ellen looked back and thought. There were nearly thirty troops accompanying her.

---

“So the boss is in the house. I want ten of you in there.”

The soldiers got off their horses and entered the mansion with sword and spear at the ready. Tigre turned around and looked at Teita.

Though Teita was surprised, tears blotted her hazel eyes. She clung to Tigre strongly.

“Tigre-sama!”

She called Tigre's name many times, the sound of tears mixing in her voice.

“I believed... I knew Tigre-sama would return.”

“Sorry for worrying you. It's fine now.”

Tigre wanted to hold Teita closely until she settled down, but there was no time. Their bodies separated.

Tigre noticed the black bow Teita held.

Teita's clothes were torn, her fair skin and undergarments were visible. Tigre removed his mantle and gently wrapped her body.

“Why did you take the bow?”

“Ah, this is the only thing I could carry...”

Teita had finished crying. Given her situation, she was embarrassed when answering the question.

“Let me take care of myself. You should have evacuated.”

“I, I couldn't do that!”

Tigre frowned. Teita refused him with a strong tone.

“Tigre-sama, you left the house to me. Even if it was scary, I couldn't run away.”

Tigre sighed. Though he knew of Teita's stubbornness, it was beyond his imagination.

“What an energetic girl. Do you like her?”

Ellen, on horseback, looked down at Teita, apparently pleased.

Hearing the voice, Teita looked up at Ellen and then looked around.

Behind Ellen, Knights in iron armor lined up silently and increased in number.

Around them, many of Thenardier's men rolled on the ground.

“What, what is this? Tigre-sama, who on earth are these people...”

“Ah, this is Ellen... She is a Vanadis of Zhcted, Eleanora Viltaria. They are her subordinates.”

Tigre explained in a vacant tone. Teita was at a loss for words, her mouth was slightly agape.

“If I were to tell you more, it would take a while...”

Tigre stopped speaking. His left hand thrust before Teita's face as he grabbed an arrow shot from the shadows.

---

Tigre nocked the arrow he just caught and shot the bow in an off-hand manner. A muffled scream came from where the arrow disappeared. He had shot the hidden enemy soldier, causing a voice of admiration to sound from his allies.

“Uu...”

Pain ran through his hand holding a bow. Tigre looked at his palm. He must have been injured when he grabbed the arrow, as the wound ran linearly.

“Tigre-sama, your hand.”

Teita tore her skirt without hesitation and carefully wrapped Tigre's hand with it.

“Sorry, I'm only good at these things...”

“That's enough. Thank you.”

He patted Teita's head in gratitude.

“Are you injured?”

Tigre returned a smile as Ellen asked him anxiously.

“No problem. I can still fight.”

The fight had just begun. He would not stop with a wound of this level.

“I would hope so. Look, reinforcements.”

Ellen glanced away and laughed calmly. From the other side of the main street, many Knights were rushing fiercely on their horses. They were Thenardier's troops.

After waiting for them to approach a certain distance, Ellen ordered her cavalry.

“Black <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Dragon Flag!”

The banner of Zhcted hung high and wide. The soldiers of House Thenardier screamed in terror. Most had participated in the Battle of Dinant.

The vivid colors of the flag fluttered in the wind. They had learned to fear it in battle.

Ellen smiled and pointed her sword at the remaining forces.

“Charge!”

---

A battle cry sounded from Zhcted army. The troops brandished their swords and spears and ran fiercely on their horses.

Before exchanging blades, the troops from Thenardier lost their will to fight. They screamed and turned to flee.

“Tigre, We're going.”

Tigre looked at his bow as he tried to respond.

There was a deep crack.

--- *Was it when I caught Teita?*

Because he was rushed and had only vague thoughts, he had only now noticed the damage to his bow.

--- *I can't use this anymore. It will take time and materials to mend it as well.*

The arrow he shot a moment ago would be its last.

“Tigre-sama.”

Teita ran up to him with short steps and presented the black bow to Tigre with both hands.

---

She had defended it, the black bow which was his family heirloom.

Tigre recalled his father's words.

*Only when you truly need this bow should you use it. Do not use it otherwise.*

Tigre hesitated for a moment.

--- *No.*

Surely this was such a time.

Tigre received the bow.

Though it felt as eerie as usual, he lightly plucked the string. He had neglected it for more than a month. The faintly trembling air and a certain elasticity transmitted through his finger.

--- *I can use it as it is.*

As he grasped the bow he had not used to date, a harmonious feeling traveled through his hand.

---

Though he had touched the bow many times, it was his first time feeling this.

It was as if the bow was willing to let him use it.

*--- Father, as the present head of the Vorn family, I will use this bow to show you a fight that will not shame my name.*

“Lord Tigrevurmud!”

“Young Lord! You're safe!”

Rurick and Batran ran up on their horses. Tigre stood up and shook their hands.

“Rurick, I'm depending on you to take care of this girl.”

Leaving Teita to the bald archer, Tigre gripped his black bow and mounted a horse.

“Ah, um...”

While sitting on Rurick's horse, Teita fearfully called out to Ellen.

“Hm? What is it?”

Ellen looked at Teita with interest.

“What is your relationship with Tigre-sama?”

Ellen almost laughed, but replied with a whimsical tone.

“That guy. He's mine.”

It was not a lie.

Tigre asked Ellen to lend him her soldiers, but he was still not freed as a prisoner.

And in the few days it took to reach Alsace from LeitMeritz, the deadline, as stipulated by the ransom, passed.

*--- Tigre probably hasn't noticed. Either way, he can't do anything about it.*

Ellen looked toward the Thenardier Army with a brilliant smile.

---

Though Teita was surprised, she stared at Ellen and clasped her hands, squeezing them together to gather her courage.

“I, I won't lose...!”

“I'm looking forward to it. I'll have to talk to Tigre about who he'll be married to.”

Ellen laughed as she saw Teita off.

A soldier appeared with a report.

“I'm sorry, the enemy's leader escaped.”

“I see. Well, it can't be helped.”

Ellen murmured with regret.

When Tigre heard Teita remained in his mansion while the Thenardier Army attacked, he recklessly rushed in fright.

With only his horse, he had quickly made his way to the mansion.

Ellen panicked and had her men follow her. She caught up as Teita fell from the second floor.

In that time, Zaien was able to run away.

*--- I'm a bit jealous.*

“The enemy is currently reorganizing and are preparing to withdraw.”

“You worked hard.”

After giving words of appreciation to the soldier, Ellen brought her horse near Tigre.

Though Batran was speaking to Tigre, he nodded slightly as soon as he noticed Ellen.

“I will go.”

“Let's go, then.”

The two spoke at the same time and laughed as they looked at each other.

---

“Leave about one hundred men to search for those who are lurking about in town. We will attack with the rest.”

They were fighting a force three times their size. Tigre and Ellen, as well as the soldiers they lead, had a high morale.

“Don't let even a single soldier escape. We will repay them in full.”

He did not have the desire to drive them away or finish the battle. He would crush them.

“Batran.”

Tigre turned to the old soldier by his side. His smile was full of anger and the will to fight.

“Hold my quiver and follow me.”

“With both hands? I don't mind, but can't I even have a sword to block with?”

“Relax.”

---

Tigre smiled bullishly toward the old man who was up to his normal antics.

“So long as you are with Ellen and me, neither sword nor arrow will reach you. I will not let it happen.”

Zaien escaped through the back door of the mansion and avoided the eyes of his soldiers. Upon his return, he received a surprising report.

“The Zhcted Army is attacking! The Black <sup>Zirnitra</sup> Dragon Flag!”

“Zhcted? Impossible! Why would they show up here!”

The soldiers' faces went pale. The power they had when attacking the town was no longer present.

While treating the hand hit by Tigre, Zaien stared at his soldiers.

---

*--- Such cowardice. Why did I take these people?*

This time, Zaien led three thousand soldiers, and more than 80% had participated in Dinant.

Zaien wished to remove the dissatisfaction and fear of defeat from them as quickly as possible. They would soon battle Ganelon.

It had completely backfired.

Their fear of the Zhcted Army revived in his soldiers.

“Black Dragon...”

Zaien's voice trembled, a cold sweat blotted his forehead. It was not just the soldiers who were fearful.

“But why is Vorn here... Wasn't Vorn a prisoner of Zhcted?”

Zaien was convinced.

“Did he sell himself to that country? He defected to Zhcted, and just when we attacked the town... That traitor, that coward.”

---

The Thenardier Army left the town of Celesta and joined with the scattered soldiers as they moved toward Molsheim Plains.

Molsheim Plains had flat terrain and would be the best location to demonstrate the might of his army.

Zaien summoned his units and had them reorganize.

“How many soldiers?”

“About twenty-seven hundred.”

Zaien was irritated. Three hundred soldiers were lost in the town.

If he had not allowed his troops to indulge in the chaos and had taken charge of his army, he would have been able to escape from the city without too large a sacrifice.

“And the enemy?”

“I don't know for sure... a few hundred, one thousand at the most.”

“I need to know how many! Increase the number of scouts! Find the exact number!”

---

Zaien ground his teeth as he drove the soldiers away.

“... Shit. Well, I have the Dragon here.”

Though he did not think he would have a chance to use it, there would be no shortage of fodder if the enemy attacked.

“We will beat and crush them. I will get rid of the disgrace from Dinant.”

Zaien divided his remaining troops in two.

One group was composed of spear bearers and infantry.

The other group consisted of one thousand troops and remained grounded with him.

The main force of one thousand troops stood behind the <sup>Vyfal</sup> Wyvern.

The army of Brune was lined in three rows on the Molsheim Plains. It was a more than effective plan.

---

Though Tigre's mansion was ruined, some of the objects were safe, the map of the Alsace territory included.

While studying the map, Ellen, Tigre, and Lim, on horseback, spoke to each other.

"Though we have one thousand troops, we need to leave some to defend the town. We'll only have nine hundred to fight with. Based on our scouts, the enemy numbers three thousand. Even if they have decreased somewhat, we are still outnumbered three to one."

Ellen looked at Tigre after hearing Lim's explanation.

"Tigre, do you know where the enemy might escape to ?"

"Probably the Molsheim Plains."

Tigre pointed at the map.

“Zaien will place his troops so as to maximize a counterattack, then he'll follow after us. Until then, he'll just stay in position. The only place he can do that is at Molsheim Plains.”

Unlike the rest of Alsace, full of mountains and forests, the Molsheim Plains had gentle hills.

“The strength of Brune lies in their ability to settle down and rush forward with spear and shield.”

As she had said, Brune excelled in rushing power and the ability to penetrate defenses.

They held long spears and wore thick iron armor while riding horses. They attacked through the crevices between shield bearers.

The shields would be stuck together tightly and was large enough to cover them from head to waist. Though heavy, they could protect themselves while mounted.

Lining up and charging together, it was one of Brune's most frequently used tactics.

Most frightening was how difficult it was to run away from their attack. With their heavy armor and long

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spears, even the soldiers behind the front lines could be skewered.

“If they use shields, then we just have to shower them with arrows.”

Brune was full of fools who boasted of their strength, all while making light of the arrow.

“Brune Kingdom has many undulating meadows. Those means of fighting are a necessity.”

“Very well. We'll shoot them.”

Ellen declared clearly.

“Tigre, four hundred soldiers, and I will go. Lim, I leave the rest to you. Take any advantage you can. By the way, any suggestions?”

“I would like rope. It's best if it is a bundle of thin rope. As many as possible.”

Having heard her, Tigre cautiously asked her a question.

“What will you do with the horses?”

---

They had traveled from LeitMeritz in a hurry. Lim tilted her head in confusion.

“Is it a problem if we leave them in Celesta?”

“I just thought of something. Would you let me use them?”

It happened a half koku later.

Both armies faced off in Molsheim Plains.

Ellen and Tigre led four hundred cavalry, shrinking the distance little by little.

They reached the distance at which he could aim his arrow. Tigre swallowed his saliva in tension.

“Are you afraid?”

Ellen spoke quietly to Tigre so only he could hear.

“I am afraid.”

Though Tigre answered in such a manner, he was smiling.

---

It was true Tigre was afraid, but he was next to Ellen, which calmed him down. Rather than anxiety, he felt courage welling deep within his body.

“But – I don't feel like losing.”

The troops before him more than doubled his own.

“What a coincidence, same here.”

Ellen unsheathed her longsword and held it high. A small wind stroked Tigre and Ellen, as if encouraging the warriors.

“I wonder if I'm feeling this for the first time because you're next to me.”

As soon as they were done joking, her smile disappeared. She swung her blade.

“Charge!”

Amidst the noise of the battlefield, a mysterious wind carried the girl's voice across the battlefield.

The four hundred Zhcted troops ran across the land as they raised a battle cry. The sky above the Thenardier

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Army was covered in countless arrows as both armies opened fire.

“Arifal.”

A calm wind whirled around Ellen's sword. The attacks swirled around the troops, making all arrows fall to the ground.

Tigre pulled arrows from his quiver and nocked them between each of four fingers and released them, skewering three enemies through the face at almost the same time. They fell, motionless.

“You really are a man without convention.”

Ellen looked impressed as she spoke with admiration.

“To hear I lack convention from you is a bit unsatisfying.”

“Don't worry, it was a complement.”

The two armies clashed.

A spear was thrust from the right and left toward Ellen

Her horse skillfully avoided them. Ellen raised her sword, and, with two quick flashes, blood flew from two necks.

Her silver-white hair waved in the wind. Every time the Silver Flash glittered, a fountain of fresh blood from the enemy was created.

--- *[Wind Princess of the Silver Flash] and  
[Danseuse of the Sword], is it?*

Brilliantly poised on her horse, her sword moved through the wind as if dancing. Tigre thought the two nicknames were well suited.

“I can't lose here.”

Tigre drew his bow to the limit and struck the head of the Commanders and flag bearer. The archers were still out of distance.

Thinking normally, it was odd to be able to aim his arrows so accurately in such a situation.

The blade of an enemy approached from the edge of his view. A scream and blood flew out before him before he completed his aim.

Tigre neither evaded nor defended and concentrated solely on his bow. His trust in Ellen made it possible.

In response to his faith, Ellen let neither spear nor sword reach him. All soldiers were cut down, all arrows knocked away.

Thenardier's first formation, with their Commander and flag bearer shot down, were confused for a time and quickly collapsed.

Ellen broke through the first unit.

The enemy's second formation, the main force, appeared.

Their massive number and force gave them a sense of strength and terror.

“Charge!”

The roar of horseshoes and the clash of Knights shook the earth.

Tigre let loose an arrow at soldiers on horseback rushing toward him. Though the men fell off their horses, he did not allow himself to relax.

“Leave it to me. You take the flag and the Commanders and lower their morale.”

The soldiers of Zhcted rushed forward, overwhelming the enemy.

Tigre aimed at the enemy's flag bearer in the areas where the troops collided.

Though they collided with full force, Ellen did not waver a single step. She parried swords, cut through shields, and cleaved through the helmets of the enemy.

“... Is that the strength of her sword?”

Though Ellen was an excellent swordswoman, it was absurd to think she could cut through a helmet with her slender arms. The Vanadis of silver-white hair responded

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“Before the Silver Flash, armor is nothing but paper.”

Tigre shot one arrow after another, knocking the horses over and forcing their riders to the ground. Though he saw the corpses on the ground, he did not flinch and continued without mercy. When a spear closed in, he switched to a sword.

The Zhcted Army was being pushed back. The numbers were vastly different, so they were gradually forced to retreat.

Also...

“An Earth <sup>Suro</sup> Dragon is approaching!”

The soldier reporting could not hide his fear. Ellen frowned.

“Did Thenardier manage to tame a Dragon while I was unaware?”

“I doubt it. If they had it prepared, it would have shown up in Dinant.”

Impatience and tension floated to Tigre's face.

He saw the Earth Dragon. Its length was greater than the one Tigre killed before.

“Copper colored, is it?”

The Earth Dragon gave a roar. The men trembled and their armor rattled. The horses were paralyzed in fear, both friend and foe alike.

The Earth Dragon stamped the ground as it ran. Its tail mowed down the soldiers of Zhcted as it passed by, and it tore through soldiers with its arms. Nothing worked against it.

One person was eaten, another was cut in half as his body vomited blood. There were soldiers who stood up to it, but their attacks did not work.

Its brass scales were not injured. Swords were broken, spears were thrust aside. Axes and maces had their handles cracked.

With their weapons lost, they were stepped on cruelly and crushed underfoot.

Tigre shot an arrow at the Dragon's eye.

The arrow was accurately aimed at the eye, but was easily repelled. Tigre looked grim. Though the Earth Dragon's eyesight was not terribly good, a special film protected it.

--- *There were a number of things I could use back then...*

This time, it was a vast plain, where the Earth Dragon could exercise its power.

The soldiers were mowed down. The Earth Dragon raged about as it turned. The meadow was paved in blood, lumps of flesh and iron scraps distorted the landscape.

It was only a single Dragon, yet hundreds of men were helpless and could not halt its advances.

--- *What should I do...*

It was not possible to advance while avoiding the Dragon. The Dragon moved to the left and right, blocking all passage to the Thenardier Army. Once the distance to the Dragon shrunk, the army moved further back.

---

The soldiers of Zhcted were shaking. Ellen drew her longsword as if scolding her soldiers.

“Stand your ground! This will be our victory!”

Tigre stood next to her. At this distance, he could aim at the gap in the enemy's armor.

*--- Though I won't be shooting at the Dragon, my shots will be limited.*

Batran held more arrows from behind as Tigre continued to shoot. He did not know how many he shot, yet though his fingers and arms were numb, Tigre continued to shoot.

Suddenly, they were cornered on the battlefield.

The field was large and held the four hundred troops. By this time, Lim's men had advanced around the Thenardier Army.

*--- I was waiting for this.*

Ellen made her horse advance. She thrust her arm vertically and rushed toward the Earth Dragon.

“Fighting a Dragon was unexpected. I'll show you a little trick with this Earth Dragon.”

Arifal, called by Ellen, tinged a pale color in response. Around the blade a wind roared, a small storm brewed about it.

The storm continued to undulate. It condensed into a raging tempest.

Ley Admos  
“Cleavé the Wind!”

She swung her arm downward, throwing the wind along the ground.

The ringing of the wind split the ear. It bored into the earth as it traveled.

The scales, impossible to pierce with sword or spear, the nails and fangs, the entirety of the Earth Dragon was sheared in half.

On the ground lay the corpse of the Dragon, a deep crevice engraved about it.

Those of Thenardier stood still.

They had seen something unnatural with their eyes. Wind flowed from Ellen's sword and brought her triumph.

“What was that? I've never seen that before!”

Tigre inadvertently shouted in excitement.

“Of course, since it was the first time I showed you.”

Watching the blue light of the wind disappear, Ellen let out a small breath.



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“It is a mighty power that can't be used by ordinary humans. There are few who have ever seen. Aren't you lucky?”

“I hope nothing ever happens that requires I see it again.”

Although Ellen's eyes sharpened for a moment, her gaze teased Tigre as she looked at him. They laughed together.

The Zhcted Army could now continue to march.

Shortly before the Earth Dragon's defeat, Zaien received a message that a second team, detached from the unit, approximately four hundred in size, approached from the west.

“From what happened on Dinant, I figured they would do something like this.”

Lim's troops knew of the approaching enemy and began to withdraw immediately. They sporadically stopped their resistance and remained on a slightly elevated hill a small distance away.

---

They were a force of four hundred led by Lim, and they were being chased.

It seemed there was an accident as the soldiers of the Thenardier Army moved up the hill swiftly. Once they reached the middle of the slope, they fell simultaneously, as if caught by something.

They noticed a muddy rope stretched across their legs. They fell hard, and many were tied together.

The men looked up, realizing they were trapped. The troops from Zhcted turned around and ran down the slope.

“Look at the enemy, they did not pay attention to the ground below them and fell.”

Lim murmured and pointed down the hill, guiding her soldiers.

This resulted in a quick reversal, in which the four hundred detached troops defeated the Thenardier Army with surprising swiftness.

--- *This is thanks to Lord Tigrevurmud.*

---

Gathering her troops, Lim muttered the words in the back of her mind as she looked in the direction Ellen fought.

Lim had the residents of Celesta prepare rope for the hill, but did not believe there would be enough time. In spite of that, enough had been gathered to devastate Zaien's troops.

*--- I doubt it would go well enough with just their hatred for Thenardier. It must have been due to the trust they hold in Lord Tigrevurmud.*

Pushing her golden hair aside, Lim looked to the sky.

The sun was sinking.

The color of the sky was changing; night would come soon.

Zaien was given two reports, one after another. His detached corps was routed, and the ground forces, including the Earth Dragon, were defeated.

“... That can't be.”

---

He muttered, his small body trembled as he stood by  
the Wyvern.  
Vyfal

“What about the Dragon? Isn't it an Earth Dragon?  
Isn't it invulnerable to swords and spears?”

Nothing could be answered.

“Zaien-sama, use the Wyvern.”

One person advised him to give up.

“The Earth Dragon should have slaughtered them!”

Zaien shouted at his subordinates.

“It was a valuable Dragon I borrowed from father. Its  
claws were more precious than even one hundred of you!  
”

However, he could think of no other plan.

A new report was brought to him.

“Enemy forces have approached from the rear!”

Zaien was annoyed.

---

“How many are there?”

“It is difficult to tell since it is approaching nightfall, but it appears to be two thousand cavalry hidden in the shadows.”

“... Two thousand?”

It took him time to speak.

The impact Zaien received was immeasurable. The morale he had kept until now had finally disappeared.

Right now, he had only six hundred soldiers remaining. The Dragon was not within his calculations as a human.

*--- How can I fight with more than three times the enemy coming from behind?*

Zaien did not notice the actual number of enemies.

Though there were two thousand horses, there were only one hundred men.

This region, when dark, was shadowed by the mountains and forests. Tigre understood that.

---

It was not just Zaien but his soldiers who were visibly upset.

Originally, he had not come to fight in Alsace. He had simply come to pillage the land.

“Call back the second formation! Have them retreat!”

Hearing Zaien's instructions, the soldiers nearby were stunned.

They were surrounded. He was telling them to gather and fight to the end.

“Zaien-sama, please remain here. Even with two thousand troops, the Zhcted Army cannot take us out in an instant. If we can hold on until the last enemy is cut down, we will be victorious!”

“Shut up!”

Zaien hit the ground hard. The arrow wound in his hand destroyed what little calm remained in him.

“You will hold your ground? You, did you already forget your miserable defeat in Dinant?”

---

His fear changed to violence.

Zaien did not want to taste the defeat of Dinant again.

“Besides, we have two thousand troops approaching from the rear! How can we possibly hold our ground!”

If he knew the troops approaching from behind numbered only one hundred, he may have been able to remain calm. Could he fight back? There must have been a way.

However, it was impossible for him to know. Due to Ellen and Lim's skillful command, he did not realize it.

When Zaien's instructions were transmitted to the second formation, their morale had already greatly decreased.

At a distance where his blade could reach the enemy, he would fight desperately.

With the enemy he could not see approaching, he had to give unreasonable instructions.

However, they served House Thenardier. The troops could not act independently.

---

With their retreat, the battlefield changed.

Ellen did not overlook it.

“We're fighting back now!”

Ellen cried out to her troops. Until now, she had killed many an enemy, yet on her beautiful face, in her silver-white hair, there was not a single drop of blood. She raised her blade, which remained unmarred.

A cheer erupted from the exhausted soldiers.

Unlike the Thenardier Army, they came to fight.

Ellen, Tigre, and those who wielded a sword at the front, none would hold back.

As the enemy retreated, Ellen cried out mercilessly.

In addition, Lim's forces also joined them. The soldiers attacked from two directions.

Taking advantage of their mobility, they cut into the cavalry, little by little. Eventually, the enemy collapsed.

---

The flow of battle this evening was completely in favor of the Zhcted Army.

When the main force clashed with the Zhcted Army, Zaien, guarded by fifty cavalry two belsta (about two Vyfal kilometers) away, stepped away from the Wyvern.

“That bastard, that bastard...”

His words could not be heard by the others. There was no excuse for his disastrous defeat. Though the main force, further away, still endured, they were clearly being pushed back. It would only be a matter of time before they were forced to retreat.

“This can't be. I can't possibly lose... Not to Vorn.”

He was interrupted there. He recognized the shadows of ten of the enemy troops approaching him.

“Vorn...”

The two standing at the head of the rest were Tigre and Ellen. Zaien knew, having fled before.

Though Tigre planned to go alone, Ellen left the command of the army to Lim and followed him with a few subordinates.

“You can't escape this late in the battle.”

Staring at Zaien, Tigre threw out those words in anger.

However, Zaien did not care about Tigre's feelings. Picking up a shield and spear, he advanced. Abhorrence floated in his eyes, a sneer covered his face.

“So you'd betray your country. I suppose the lowly blood of a hunter would invite the enemy. You're putting on quite a smug face. How dare you!”

“Before you insult me, you should look at yourself.”

“What?”

“Burning the homes of innocents, stealing their possessions. You are no better than a thief.”

Tigre spoke those words with a quiet anger. His voice was strong. Zaien took a deep breath.

“People?”

---

Zaien spoke with contempt. He would not forgive himself if he allowed Tigre to call him a thief. Tigre's insult was inexcusable.

"People, you say. I simply took what they threw away and cut things that passed by me. Why should I bother worrying?"

Ellen muttered as if he were a trivial man.

Tigre did not respond. He realized words would be useless.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but I will not forgive you for invading my territory and harming the people under my dominion."

"Acting like you're important..."

No more words left Zaien's mouth. Ignoring Tigre, he pointed his spear and shouted.

"Fight me, Vorn! Or is that impossible, since you're always running away?"

"Have you lost your mind?"

Ellen spoke in amazement. Though she tried to shout an order to her subordinates, Tigre stretched out his arm, restraining her.

“It can't be, you plan to do it?”

Tigre nodded silently and strongly. Ellen pouted and let out a small noise momentarily, then she tapped Tigre's shoulder with a smile.

“Very well. This is your fight.”

“... Thank you.”

Thanking Ellen without looking back, Tigre clutched his bow and moved forward on his horse.

Seeing Tigre, Zaien looked at him suspiciously.

“Your weapon? You aren't taking a sword or spear from those Zhcted bastards?”

“This is my weapon.”

Tigre thrust out his jet-black bow in a dignified manner. Zaien stared at him in irritation.

---

“Are you joking? How will you fight with a bow? All you can do is get a surprise attack.”

“... Want to try me?”

Tigre pulled an arrow from his quiver and shot it after nocking it.

Though the arrow tore through the wind and sped toward Zaien's head, it was blocked by the shield.

Tigre did not care and aimed at Zaien's chest. It was, once again, blocked by the shield.

“No matter how many times you try, it's useless.”

Zaien jeered. Ellen simply watched on in silence.

Tigre took his third shot and aimed for Zaien's right arm. Once again, it stuck into the shield.

“That's enough!”

Zaien gazed at Tigre in anger and mockery.

“It seems you're useless in combat. Not only are you a traitor, you can only use a bow. To the end you couldn't

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act like a noble of Brune. I will take your precious neck and end everything here."

He no longer wished to associate with Tigre and made his judgment. He then rushed forward with spear in hand.

Tigre did not move and nocked an arrow.

Even Ellen's eyes were glued to the scene. Though neither she nor her soldiers knew what would happen, she grasped her blade and started to cry out.

At that moment, the two shadows crossed.

Blood appeared on Zaien's spear as it skimmed Tigre's body. Tigre managed to escape by a narrow margin.

On the other hand, Tigre shot an arrow which pierced through the shield.

It happened immediately after that.

A groan was emitted.

It was Zaien's voice. Stopping the horse, he crouched forward. His handsome face was soiled by his black hair,

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distorted in agony. He was covered in a greasy sweat from the sharp pain.

The arrow Tigre shot traveled through the shield and deeply penetrated Zaien's left arm. His attack happened slightly before the spear hit Tigre, so Zaien's movements were dulled.

Just then, Zaien noticed.

Tigre had concentrated all arrows on the same portion of the shield. The fourth was able to pierce through the thick oak.

He shivered in terror.

Zaien had not fixed his shield's motion; rather, he moved in accordance to the arrows Tigre shot. The final shot occurred as they passed each other.

*--- Did he read how I would move my shield?*

None amongst the Thenardier Army could understand Tigre's skill.

Still, Tigre had pierced through a shield with only four arrows.

---

They had held the bow in derision until now.

Archers had been held in contempt, ridiculed, outcast, and treated as criminals.

Now, they were forced to fear what it could do.

Tigre nocked his fifth arrow. Cold sweat dripped from Zaien's face.

A cry was heard. Zaien moved away. Soldiers rode their horses in to defend Zaien.

Ellen silently acted upon seeing their movements. She ordered her men to charge as she brandished the Silver Flash.

The Zhcted Army and Thenardier Army faced one another. Tigre was caught in the turmoil, but was protected. Zaien, too, was helped by his men and disappeared from Tigre's view.

“Look at you.”

Ellen called out in an angry voice as she drew closer on her horse. Her white finger gently traced Tigre's bleeding wound.

---

“It's just a cut... Don't worry me so much.”

Ellen showed an expression of caring befitting neither a Commander or swordsman but a girl her age. Tigre could not look directly at her.

“Your hand looks terrible as well.”

Ellen looked at the injury on his left hand for the first time.

The wound had opened again. The cloth Teita wrapped around his hand was soaked in blood as he gripped his bow.

Finally realizing it, he felt the pain in his hand, though he could still shoot arrows.

--- *Where is Zaien?*

Tigre searched for the enemy General.

A strong gust of wind blew, and the horses flinched. Tigre protected his face with his arm and looked about carefully.

---

“... A Wyvern!?”<sup>Vyfal</sup>

With large wings reminiscent of a bat, now fully expanded, the Wyvern flew high into the sky, carrying Zaien on its back.

Every time it flapped its wings, the wind generated forced Tigre and Ellen to stop. The Wyvern flew high into the air.

It circled in the air to stabilize itself. It then turned and moved away from the battlefield.

“My wind can't reach that...!”

Ellen frowned in regret.

Tigre nocked an arrow to his bow; Zaien's figure was hidden by the Wyvern.

His arrow would reach, but it would not pierce through the Wyvern's scales. It was no different from the fight with the Earth Dragon.<sup>Suro</sup>

... He did not have the power.

He could not allow such a thing to happen.

---

[Shoot the Dragon.]

Suddenly, a quiet voice sounded in Tigre's head.

--- *What was that?*

Tigre looked about in surprise, but no one had called for him.

Though it sounded like a woman's voice, Ellen was focused on the enemy before her.

[I will say it once again. Shoot the Dragon.]

He heard the voice again.

He understood it clearly this time.

Despite the screams, the sound of weapons clashing, armors shattering, and corpses falling, the voice resounded.

The voice reaching his ear was clearly different.

Tigre glanced at the black bow in his hand.

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--- *Could it be this?*

He felt a sense of incongruity with the black bow, that is why he thought that.

Looking at the sky again, the Wyvern had moved even further.

--- *If I don't pay him back, I know I'll regret it...!*

Tigre, determined, drew his arrow back.

His town was scorched and his people injured. He would never permit the man who harmed Teita to run away.

In accordance to the words, he aimed his bow at the Wyvern and shot the arrow.

Was it truly an arrow? The moment the arrow was released, a fierce backlash hit Tigre's body. At the same time, the Silver Flash in Ellen's hand tinged a pale light.

The shot flew straight, propelled by a helical wind.

It sounded like the roar of a beast. It flew toward the <sup>Vyfal</sup> Wyvern and went past.

Though the Wyvern lost its balance, it was not injured.

--- *What happened?*

Tigre looked at the Wyvern and a deformed cloud in blank surprise.

He had never heard of an arrow acting in such a manner.

“Tigre!”

Tigre returned with Ellen's voice. She was also surprised. Tigre felt as if it was the first time she had ever been surprised on the battlefield.

“What was that just now...? I've only seen something <sup>Viralt</sup> like that with a [Dragonic Tool].”

No answer could be found. He could not reply to Ellen's question.

“I don't know, either...”

---

A shadow moved over Tigre's head as he responded in bewilderment.

The Wyvern had somehow recovered. It was running from the battlefield again.

Tigre readied a new arrow. Though he did not understand, he knew he could kill the Wyvern.

--- *The next... will hit!*

Ellen drew her horse close to Tigre and raised her longsword.

“I'll take care of the wind. You just aim the arrow!”

Ellen knew nothing about Tigre's bow.

However, when Tigre shot his arrow, her sword lit up in response. It was as if it allowed him to shoot his arrow in a supernatural manner.

--- *I don't know what happened... But if it's Tigre, he can do it.*

Though it was no different from intuition, Ellen knew her [Dragonic Tool].

---

It was not a longsword she simply came upon.

Her [Silver Flash] was given the name of  
[Brilliant Beheader of the Fallen Spirit].

“--- Please.”

Ellen did not know Tigre very well.

But she believed in him.

Steadying his arm and aiming at the Wyvern, he drew his bow to its limit.

He released it.

The atmosphere swelled and space distorted, twisting about his arrow.

The shock wave blew the nearby soldiers away.

Smoke followed the path of the arrow, forming a storm which raged strong enough that those nearby could not open their eyes.

---

The arrow Tigre shot advanced, a brutal tornado in its wake. It hit the Wyvern's abdomen.

--- *Pierce it.*

The Wyvern let out an earsplitting sound as it was injured. It moved weakly back and forth and crashed in a nearby marsh.

It hit the water with a dull sound.

The Dragon sunk completely. Zaien did not float to the surface.

All looked at where the Wyvern crashed, completely stunned. Even Tigre, who shot the arrow, watched with astonishment.

The soldiers of the Thenardier Army dropped their arms. It took a while for everyone to return to consciousness, even Ellen.

“... Tigrevurmud Vorn has killed Zaien Thenardier!”

Following Ellen's voice, a shout of victory sounded from the Zhcted Army.

---



The Thenardier soldiers trembled, and their eyes faltered.

The main forces of the Thenardier Army, which fought , a short distance away, looked at the Wyvern as it fell to the earth. They split up and tried to escape while their enemy celebrated their victory.

Their swords and spears were discarded, and they tried to flee, collapsing over one another.

The Thenardier Army invaded Alsace with three thousand troops. Those running away numbered only nine hundred.

Their Commander was lost, their weapons and armor were cast aside, and the injured men ran away on their own.

## Epilogue

The flag fluttered in the evening wind.

Tigre, Ellen, and Lim moved ahead of the Zhcted Army and returned to Celesta.

Some soldiers, including Batran, returned to Celesta earlier to inform the people of their victory and to prepare a feast.

Even if it was a small form of gratitude, Tigre wished to greet the soldiers of Zhcted. He also wanted to restore the beauty of his town. Its revival would begin tomorrow

.

Incidentally, Tigre had emptied the eight quivers Batran held for him.

Usually, archers carry two quivers at most. Any more and it would hinder movement. He could only use that many in a fierce battle.

Later, after hearing this, Rurick muttered solemnly.

“--- All right.”

With a new cloth wound about Tigre's hand, Ellen laughed quietly.

"Thanks. You really saved me."

Tigre gave his thanks. The cloth Teita wrapped around his hand was drenched in blood, so he had it changed.

"For the time being, consider this a victory."

"For the time being, it is."

Tigre repeated Lim's words.

That was the truth of the matter; fate had made its move. It was impossible for there to be no retaliation.

Thenardier, after this defeat, would not forgive Tigre.

He would kill Tigre no matter the cost. He would surely try to destroy Alsace.

He had many things to think about besides Thenardier

.

It was not just Duke Ganelon and Thenardier, he worried about the reaction of the King and the various aristocrats. He was also anxious about Zhcted and Ellen.

Above all, he was worried about the black bow in his hand.

--- *Though it isn't reacting now, it definitely did back then.*

He communicated with it. Was it telling him its intent?

--- *It resonated with Ellen's Silver Flash...*

Ellen did not understand the reason for this.

“Amongst the many [Dragonic Tools] wielded by the Vanadis, there is no bow. I have never heard of a weapon which could call upon the power of a [Dragonic Tool], either...”

Tigre had heard of such weapons, though he thought of them as fairy tales and legends. Still, he had seen the Silver Flash first-hand.

Why did the [Silver Flash] respond?

Though he looked in interest at the Silver Flash at Ellen's waist, the wind only blew, as if teasing him.

After thinking for a time, Tigre sighed and gave up.

It was meaningless to worry about something he did not understand for the time being. It was enough that he could use it.

“A mysterious bow.”

Lim began speaking, as if she remembered something.

“I have heard of only one such bow, though it is a legend.”

Hearing Lim's words, Tigre looked at her in interest while touching the bowstring.

“A man received a bow from a Goddess. As long as he wielded it, he would not be defeated by his enemies. It is said he became King and was called the  
[King of the Magic Bullet].”

“This King, is he the incarnation of the Black Dragon?”

Lim shook her head at Tigre's question.

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“The Goddess does not come out in the founder's story, so it is possible the story is even older. Since I did not see the power of your bow, I can't say anymore.”

“[King of the Magic Bullet]<sup>Madan no Ou</sup>, is it?”

Ellen glanced at Tigre and laughed as if pleased.

“Not bad. I'll call you that from now on.”

“Then I'll have to call you [Vanadis-sama] or [Wind Princess of the Silver Flash]<sup>Silvfrau</sup> from now on.”

She poked his head.

“It's fine. It just means you've got the mettle to become a King. It's not like I was making fun of you.”

“At least fix your facial expression.”

Though she spoke formally, Ellen's mouth was loose as she held back a smile. Tigre scratched his head and sighed without any tension.

“The story is interesting, but it has nothing to do with my bow.”

---

Certainly, the voice Tigre heard was female.

However, the bow had no tasteful decoration or adornment. It was simply a black bow.

*--- Above all, it is never good to joke about becoming King.*

Such stories were numerous in the land of nobles.

“Do you not want to become King?”

Ellen tilted her head, as if she had read what was deep in Tigre's heart.

Though he had not given it much thought, he responded in such a way.

“Sleeping until noon, going out for a hunt.”

Tigre shrugged his shoulder and smiled bitterly. Ellen's ruby irises sparkled as she recalled his words

“Tigre, I have something to say to you.”

Looking at Tigre, Ellen took a deep breath and bewildered Tigre with a smile suiting her age.

---

“--- You belong to me now.”

Tigre recalled that he was still a prisoner of war.

“That's right. First of all, how about you tell me more about that maid of yours? You were so desperate to help her before.”

Running his hand through his red hair, Tigre looked away from the smile of the girl with silver-white hair, which waved in the wind.

*--- How should I answer...*

It was not just Ellen. Teita was waiting in the town. If he explained that he was still a prisoner of war, what would she say?

Though Tigre looked to Lim for help with a glance, he was ignored.

“I'm looking forward to it, Tigre.”

Before long, Celesta came into view, lights shining throughout the town.

The people were waiting.

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